

# HD

# HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Volume 38 Issue 3 Spring 2018

WERE NOT OUR HEARTS  
GRADUALLY CATCHING FIRE  
WITHIN US  
AS HE SPOKE TO US  
ON THE ROAD ?



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## MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

Do you sense the Lord present in your conversations?

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## HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Human Development Magazine is a quarterly publication for people involved in the work of fostering the human and spiritual growth of others. This includes persons involved in religious leadership and formation, spiritual direction, pastoral care, education, counseling, healthcare and those interested in the development of the whole person.

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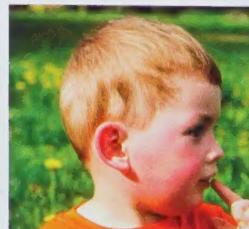
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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Spring 2018

Dear Friends of Human Development Magazine,

One of the most satisfying experiences of life is having a great conversation with a good friend. Conversely, regret over a conversation that never took place or a long-awaited encounter where the discussion was merely trivial or went “south” can be terribly frustrating. Conversation is a critical aspect of our lives; as we articulate joys or fears or share stories that are significant, we often understand in a new way something hidden in the recesses of our heart. Hearing another speak his/her story deepens a relationship and helps us understand our own life story. When a conversation takes place on a regular basis over many years, deep friendships emerge and family bonds are strengthened.

Conversations “define” our lives and give meaning to all we do. Such is also true of the “meaningful conversation” we all long to have – and need to have – with God. In fact, do we not most frequently encounter the Lord in conversation with each other?

Many months ago I proposed the topic “meaningful conversations” as a theme for one of our issues. Everyone at the Editorial Board meeting agreed that it would be a timely topic especially given the way our speech patterns have become quick sound bites, often fraught with sarcasm or anger. We hardly take the time to prepare for conversations or to evaluate them afterwards; most things are immediate and spontaneous and lacking in thoughtfulness. Tweets and sound bites, conversations about sports, politics and weather become such a monotonous loop of information that we tire of words and lose hope that there can be indeed meaningful conversations and honest dialogue on any level of society. In my own experience as a spiritual director, I have found that quite often the best conversations are those with “pregnant pauses,” when the directee struggles to reach a place of hidden wounds and unsettled issues. We cannot have a “meaningful conversation” with God unless we are also having “meaningful conversations” with each other; the two complement each other.

We are blessed with eight very diverse essays in this issue. As you read the various authors, try to imagine all of them seated around a table discussing what it means to speak from the heart! Hopefully the reflection questions attached with each essay will spark you to have a face-to-face conversation with friends or co-workers.

Brother Guy Consolmagno, Jesuit Astronomer for the Vatican, offers a cosmic perspective in the introductory essay. He reminds us that a divine-human conversation has been going on since the creation of the world; it is written into the “DNA” of all life. As Psalm 19 reminds us that “the heavens declare the glory of God,” is not the ebb and flow of water a reassuring message without words? Do not birds chirping, dogs barking and cats meowing, all express some form of conversation? Brother Guy reminds us that in contemplating the starry skies above, we can engage in a timeless, all-encompassing conversation with the mysterious source of life and love.

A retreat master for decades, Fr. Pat Brennan, a Passionist Priest, reflects on the two sides of conversation: speaking honestly and simply in a way that encourages participation and listening intently to retreatants

as they open their hearts. He offers many vignettes for reflection and suggests ways to define the building blocks necessary for a “meaningful” conversation.

In the third essay, Sr. Janet Ruffing, RSM, reminds us that conversations can open doors for new discovery of self and others; they can build bridges between people and bring about change. Sr. Janet’s essay helps us see the connection between “conversation” and “conversion.”

Fr. Rich Bartosek, a Diocesan Priest and hospital chaplain in Detroit, shares stories of conversations with people facing their final hours; he describes these conversations as “holy moments.”

Dr. Daniel Keating, a professor at Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, writes on “Ecumenical conversations.” He shares with us the story of his own journey from a “Catholic Ghetto” to fellowship with other Christians in dialogues of faith and service. He notes the importance of humble listening and deep respect for each one’s experience and language for articulating encounters with God.

In our sixth essay, Fr. David Songy, a Capuchin priest-psychologist-spiritual director, identifies the importance of understanding and accepting our vocation to find healing.

Fr. Steven Krupa, S.J., presents beautiful insights on contemplative prayer. He speaks of the “meaningful conversation” that we can all have with God, especially a conversation of “Infused Contemplation,” that is, God directly at work within us as we silently rest in His love. A director of the Exercises of St. Ignatius for decades, Fr. Krupa draws his insights together with an extended story from real life.

We are blessed to welcome back to these pages an essay by Fr. Ben Harrison, a Missionary of Charity. He offers us a letter written to his “Mumma” who died when he was only 11 years old; it is an example of a conversation that never took place while she was on this Earth but now takes place in a meaningful and healing manner as he writes to her sixty years later. As I read his short essay, I was moved to prayer and thought about the urgency of making every effort to see that all conversations are as meaningful as possible. How important it is to take the time now to say what’s in our heart.

Finally, as I reviewed the essays, I realized there were some “odds and ends” that had not been directly mentioned but, nonetheless deserving of attention. For this purpose I composed a brief Epilogue.

Again, try to think of the authors in dialogue with you and each other, engaged in a “meaningful conversation,” and discovering the Lord among them!

Your brother in the Lord,

Msgr. John Zenz

*Msgr. John P. Zenz*

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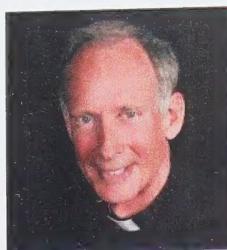




*“Were not our hearts burning  
within us while He spoke to  
us on the way and opened  
the Scriptures to us?”*

*(Luke 24:32)*

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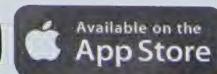


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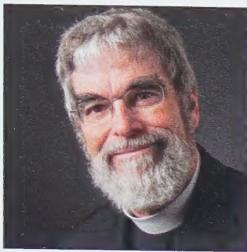


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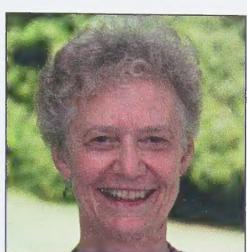
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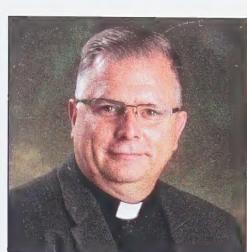
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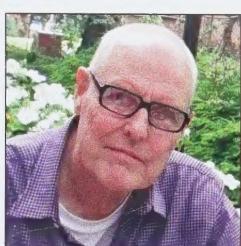
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## INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

The editors of Human Development are quite eager to publish articles that translate the latest research in psychology, health, medicine, and spirituality to ministry, formation and practice. Our hope is that Human Development will be known as the most user-friendly ministry publication. This will require making complicated theoretical knowledge, research, and concepts understandable and applicable to the personal and professional lives of our readers.

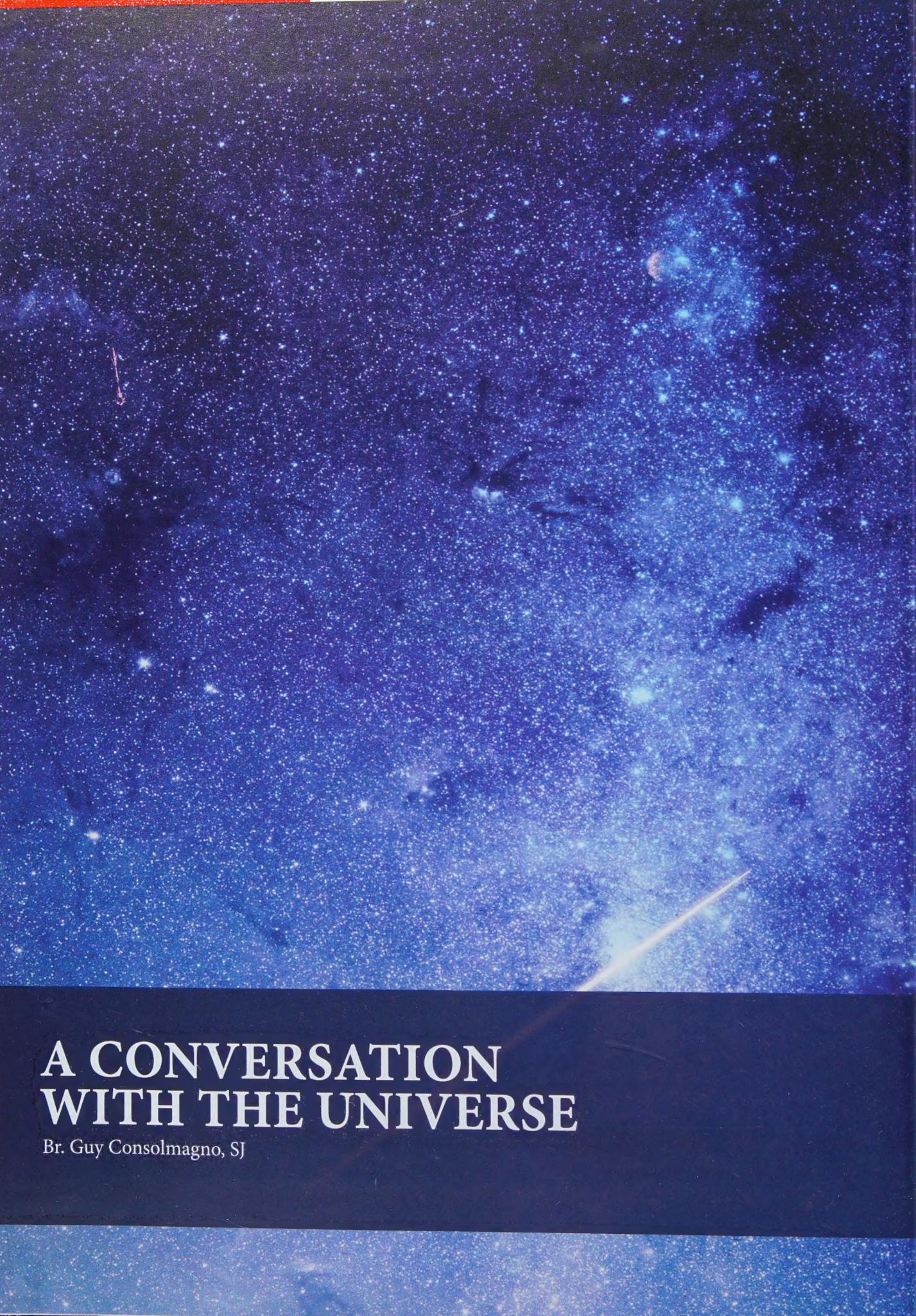
Since ministry is in a time of significant transition and change, we anticipate that the articles we publish will enlighten and positively influence the daily decisions and practices of those in Church leadership, ministry formation, spiritual direction, and counseling of any kind. There are also a number of previously under-appreciated forces that uniquely influence ministry and ministers: cultural, organizational, and situational factors. We intend to highlight and honor these factors in the pages of Human Development. Accordingly, we ask prospective authors to be mindful of these considerations in their manuscripts.

Manuscripts are received with the understanding that they have not been previously published and are not currently under consideration elsewhere. Feature articles should be limited to 4,500 words (15 double-spaced pages), with no more than six recommended citations and/or readings; filler items of between 500 and 1,000 words will be considered. All accepted material is subject to editing. When quoting sacred scripture, the New Revised Standard Version is preferred. All manuscripts are to be prepared according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th edition).

Letters are welcome and will be published as space permits and at the discretion of the editors. Such communications should not exceed 600 words and are subject to editing.

Authors are responsible for the completeness and accuracy of proper names in both text and Bibliography/suggested readings. Acknowledgments must be given when substantial material is quoted from other publications. Provide author name(s), title of article, title of journal or book, volume number, page(s), month and year, and publisher's permission to use material.

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# A CONVERSATION WITH THE UNIVERSE

Br. Guy Consolmagno, SJ



## SHARING THE STORY

Science is the study of nature. But study is only part of the story...an essential part of doing science is reporting what we have observed. That requires, of course, having someone to whom we can report. Every scientist must be a part of a community. So, science would better be described as the conversation that happens in the community of scientists, a conversation about the universe.

The importance of conversation in science first struck me, appropriately enough, in a conversation I had once with Star Trek's Captain Kirk. How I met the actor William Shatner is a long story; suffice to say that I found him to be witty, intelligent, and a fascinating conversationalist. He was puzzled by my dual roles as astronomer and Jesuit brother. And I was puzzled by his puzzlement. It's only as we tried to sort out this confusion that I learned the root of the problem. He saw science as a big book of facts; and religion as a different book of facts. And he worried about what should happen if the two books disagreed.



This “big book” misunderstanding colors much of the world’s conversation about science and religion. It’s easy enough to see where it comes from: when we were children that’s how we learned science and religion... out of big books. But equating how we learned as children with the actual activity of doing science or religion is like thinking that practicing scales on the piano is the same thing as performing Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*. Practice is something you have to do when you are learning; but it’s nothing at all like playing the music. Alas, most students quit studying science or religion (or music) before they get a chance at Beethoven.

When I taught university physics labs, I discovered that the part that gave my students the most trouble wasn’t doing the experiment; it was writing down all their results into the lab notebook, and then writing up a lab report. I had to teach them the hard lesson I had learned from my science teachers: if you didn’t write it down, it didn’t happen.

This hard tasking of writing up results doesn’t end with undergraduate classes. I have seen the inability to write clear proposals and papers stunt the careers of many of my friends in the field. Nowadays, when

I talk to high school students who are interested in science as a career I warn them that their most important courses before they get to college will be writing, speech, and art. If you don’t tell someone else about what you did, you didn’t do it. If you can give a clear and compelling talk at a conference, your results will be remembered. And the right image is worth a thousand words.

Science is the conversation we have about the study of nature. So it’s interesting to see how the way we hold a conversation informs us about the way we do science.

### PLUGGING INTO THE CONVERSATION ALREADY UNDERWAY

How do we converse? I learned about how conversations work by watching my parents and their friends, when I was a child growing up in Detroit.

In the heat of the summers, auto workers like my dad would send their families up to the lakes, great and small; our summer cottage was part of a little community of cottages up on Lake Huron. That’s where my siblings and I really grew up, running free during the days while our dads stayed in the city, working in factories and offices, joining their families on weekends.

Those weekends were special to us kids. I recall hiding in the dark, out of sight, while the grown-ups would sit around an outdoor fire, talking about everything under the sun. Of course I didn’t have any idea what they were talking about. But eventually I learned to follow their topics and their jargon... all the while, waiting for the day when I might have something good enough to add to the conversation.

Science works the same way. It is a conversation that has been ongoing since Aristotle, with its own jargon and its particular hot topics. Before we can join in, we have to spend time listening in, to find out what topics are current and what the jargon means. That’s

called being a student. Only gradually do we get to enter the conversation; and only after we've been a part of the conversation for a while do we have the right, and the ability, to introduce new topics and shift the conversation to new directions. If you try jumping in right away without listening first, you're being rude; and you're likely to make a fool of yourself, putting all the further off the day when people will actually listen to you.

(That's the sad state of those people who are always emailing us with their latest ideas proving that Einstein was wrong, or that the Gravitational Constant is exactly equal to 2/3, or that the truth behind Dark Energy can be found from carefully counting the number of words in a crucial passage of the Bible. I can't blame them for wanting in on the conversation; science can be great fun! But they haven't taken the time to listen, before they try to interrupt and interject.)

Communication skills — writing, speaking, art — are crucial to the life of a scientist. But the daily task of writing up results and reading other people's papers is only the end point of science.

Science does indeed start with the study of nature; but that study itself is a form of conversation. We start by listening to what nature has to say to us; only then can we devise experiments, which is how we reply to what we've heard, trying out our ideas to see if we've heard things right, or opening up new regions of nature for our listening ears and heart.

### **IN SCIENCE AND PRAYER, LISTENING!**

Consider the parallels between how we do science and how we pray. There are times when we come to God or nature with specific requests in mind, specific points of confusion that we hope can be cleared up. There are times when we have specific needs in mind. But there are also times, sometimes the most important times, when we stop talking and simply sit quietly in the presence of Creation and

Creator. We empty our minds and wills of our own expectations, fears and desires, and simply listen. From those moments come insights and questions... the questions that lead to the experiments or prayers that follow. The presence of God is palpable at those moments, in the experience of peace and joy.

This contrast is most starkly seen in the lives of those who are just learning to pray, or to do science. Lately it has been my joy to teach bright high school students through an online astronomy course offered through the Jesuit Virtual Learning Academy. It's a privilege to watch these teenagers as they learn to perform a task as simple - and demanding - as following the phases of the Moon.

At first, some of them report seeing the Moon at times and phases that are impossible; they report what they think I want to hear. We can recognize that as similar to a kind of false prayer, where we magically pretend to hear God tell us exactly what we desired (or feared). Eventually my students learn to pay attention to the Moon that is actually there...and to be surprised by, for example, seeing it sometimes during the morning daylight hours as they head off to school. From this they suddenly get the idea to ask about patterns in the changes of the Moon's phase. Is the Moon when it sets with the Sun at sunset always a crescent, oriented in the same direction? Is the Full Moon always found only opposite the position of the Sun? Are the full moon and the crescent always the same number of days apart? And if so, why is this so? First they learn to look; then they learn to observe what they are looking at; then they learn to ask questions about what they have seen.

God speaks to us in the things that have been made, as St. Paul tells us in the opening of his letter to the Romans. But there have been times in our salvation history when God has spoken directly to us about this universe.

Consider the opening chapter of Genesis. Scripture scholars suggest that Genesis was written during the



Babylonian exile; certainly, the physical cosmology that the author assumes is that of ancient Babylon, the best science of its day. But the message of Genesis is found exactly in those places where it stands in stark contrast with Babylon.

The Babylonians believed the universe was formed by accident out of the chaotic fights of their nature gods; and the peak of creation, to them, was the city of Babylon. But Genesis starts with only one God, who was already there even before nature was created; a God who creates in an orderly fashion, deliberately, and step by step.

Every step along the way occurs at the intent and will of the Creator. And every piece of creation He declares is good. The very first step of Creation is to call forth light, so that nothing is done hidden, in the dark; it's all there for us to see. And the last step, the ultimate step, is the Sabbath. What is the Sabbath? The time set aside from ordinary, necessary work, to contemplate and appreciate the Creator and His creation. But isn't that, after all, what science is? The high point of our week is the time we get to stop worrying about what's for lunch, and just sit back and wonder at the stars.

Another set of invitations from the Creator is found in the Book of Job. From chapter 38 and onward,

the Lord challenges Job and his companions to look closely at the universe He has made. Its immenseness and complexity is not merely bragging on the part of God, not just a way of rebuking the others for thinking that they can make excuses for God. It is also an invitation to actually go and look...to go to the dwelling of light and see what is to be found there. It is in this search – this science – that we will come to know God who created it all. And in this learning, we learn something important about God.

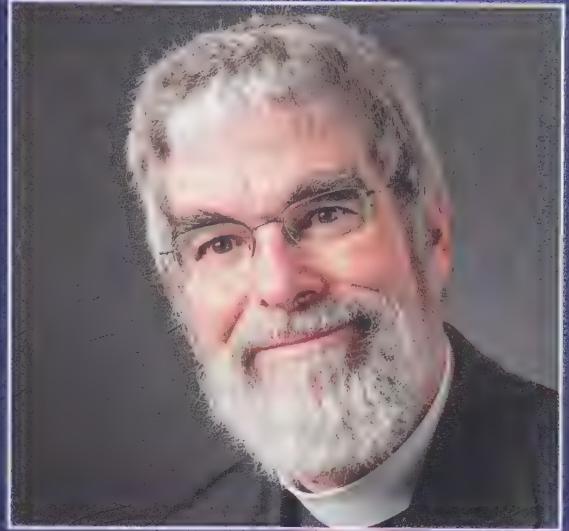
## GOD WHO WANTS TO BE OUR PLAYMATE

I remember one rainy summer afternoon at our summer cottage when I was about ten years old. No chance to go outside to play; so my mother brought out a deck of cards and dealt a hand of Michigan Rummy. As I played the game, I suddenly had one of those insights that can come unexpectedly to a ten year old. She was a grown-up; she could win the game any time she wanted. So why was she playing with me, a kid? Of course I immediately knew the answer. It was so that the two of us could be together. Playing with me was how she could tell me she loved me, a conversation that for a squirmy ten year old could only be conducted in actions, not words. I think of that often now when I am in the lab. Teasing out little insights into how my samples behave, I can sense over my shoulder someone

chuckling, first when I get it wrong, and then even with more delight when I get it right. “Did you like that one? Isn’t that fun? Wait until you see the next puzzle I have set for you!”

The Great Puzzle-maker must have had a lot of fun putting this universe together. He must have even more fun watching us play what He’s set out for us, and to watch us discover all the great things that He did. Science is a wonderful game, as much fun as cards or jigsaw puzzles.

But even better, science is a conversation I get to have with the ultimate Grown-Up. It is His way of telling me He loves me.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brother Guy Consolmagno, SJ, is the Director of the Vatican Observatory. A native of Detroit, Michigan, he earned degrees in planetary sciences at MIT and a doctorate at the University of Arizona, studying meteorites and asteroids. Along with more than 200 scientific publications, he is the author of several popular astronomy books.

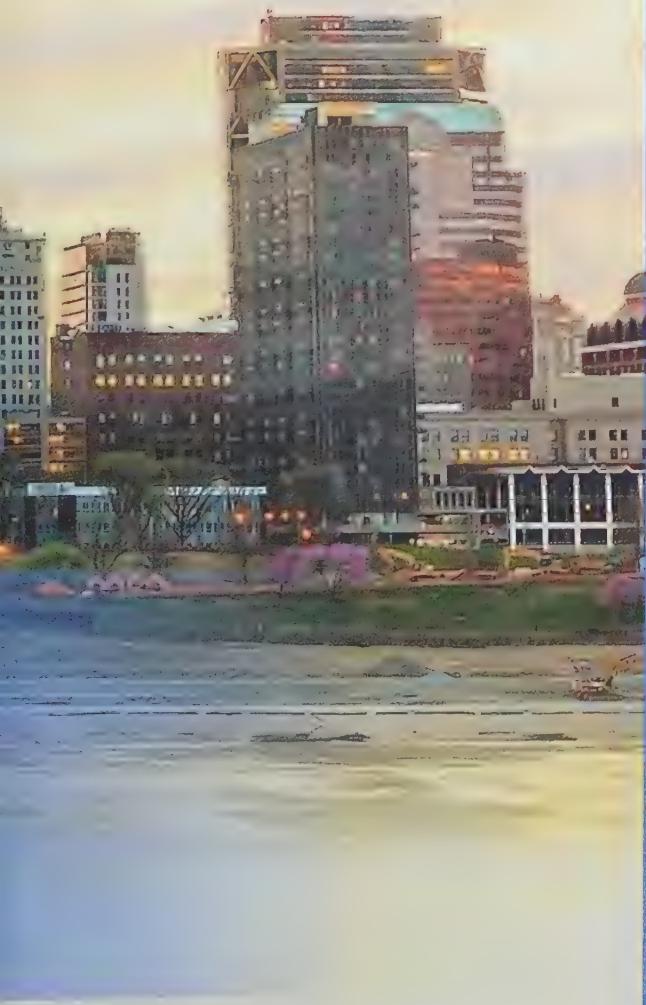
## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Br. Guy makes the point that science is a conversation that happens in a community of scientists; it is not a search alone in a laboratory. The same point could be made about any other profession and any state of life: we need companions with whom to discuss, people to share our story. What might that mean for you in your life/work at this time?
2. From his years as an astronomer, Br. Guy sees a close connection of faith and science: both invite us to enter into an eternal conversation with the Creator. Ideally, both science and faith lead us to contemplations and wonder; they humble us. Does your study lead you to God? Is your prayer truly contemplative?
3. Br. Guy ends with a charming image of God wanting to be our “playmate.” Enjoy that image!



# THE WHAT, WHY AND HOW OF MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

Patrick Brennan, CP



When I was invited to write an article reflecting on the topic of meaningful conversations my immediate thought was, "What a great chance to put into words what so much of my life and ministry has been about for over four-and-a-half decades!" As a Passionist priest, dedicated to retreat work and preaching ministry, it seems that much of what I have been about all these years is engaging people, young and old, in meaningful conversations, sharing from their hearts and souls in a way very different from simple daily conversation. This topic challenges us to think about what distinguishes conversations that come from a place of grace from the usual encounters that fill our ordinary lives.

So, what are "meaningful" conversations and what makes them so memorable, moving, and unforgettable? As a native of St. Louis, I am quick to note things that shaped my life: the famous Gateway Arch, the historic Old Cathedral, the St. Louis Cardinals and the world famous Clydesdales and Budweiser Beer!

And of course I would not want to overlook one of our most famous exports, Lawrence Peter Berra, popularly known as “Yogi.” To paraphrase one of his famous “Yogism’s” and pertinent to our topic, Yogi once said that it is difficult to have a good conversation because everybody is talking too much. So, are we talking too much but connecting too little? Do we really engage in meaningful conversations these days when everything is about instant communication and ever present “breaking news?” Maybe Yogi was right. Perhaps in our effort to communicate everything with such immediacy we fail to meet each other in meaningful ways after all.

I would like to share what I believe are characteristics present in “meaningful conversations,” as well as some of the gifts and blessings that flow from such personal encounters.

#### AN INVITATION TO “JUST LISTEN!”

Without a doubt my best teachers in this area are my younger twin sisters, Gina and Bobbie, who have patiently taught me that, though I am a man, a priest, and an eager problem solver, most of the time all I really have to do is just listen! My inclination, as someone who loves to help others find solutions, is to listen with one ear while already composing in my head an answer to what is being shared! In fact, wholehearted listening is simply that, listening. When people discover that another is willing to listen to them, particularly when they come from a place that

is deprived of openness or a willingness to hear the thoughts of another, how eagerly do hearts open and experiences flow! This has been particularly true in retreat ministry where I have encountered many people who come from environments where listening is not a priority. Why? Sometimes it is due to cultural influences; other times it may be that a spouse or family member is simply not accustomed or has no desire to take the time or to risk what careful listening demands. The net result is that we find many good people who are eagerly longing for someone who will hear them, care about what they have to say, and just listen.

#### WILLINGNESS TO BE VULNERABLE AND TRANSPARENT

After doing some graduate work in clinical psychology, I was blessed to be stationed at our Passionist Holy Name Retreat Center in Houston, Texas. Ask anyone you meet in the Houston area who is dealing with alcohol addiction and it is highly likely that they are very familiar with this wonderful place. While at Holy Name and for years thereafter in many other places, I was privileged to take part in a lot of 4th and 5th steps with people in recovery. As you may know, the 4th step calls for making a “searching and fearless” moral inventory of oneself. The 5th step, much like the blessing of the confessional, allows one to admit to oneself as well as to another trusted person the nature of those self-destructive things that they had done. To do all of this requires that a person is

**“My inclination, as someone who loves to help others find solutions, is to listen with one ear while already composing in my head an answer to what is being shared!”**



willing to be vulnerable and utterly transparent. It requires an amazing amount of trust. And it takes a lot of courage and bravery to just do it! Hemingway once said, "The best way you can find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them." I have found that most of the time my trust has been well rewarded. How reassuring it is for a person who is opening their heart to another to discover, in the process, that their trust is not in vain.

#### SHARING FROM THE HEART WHAT MATTERS MOST

While listening and being vulnerable are very important, equally vital is an open, caring presence and listening and sharing from the

heart. In this kind of encounter what is shared is not primarily information or facts. Rather, the sharing comes from what one holds deep within his/her heart, a willingness to share those things that matter most. Consider the great farewell discourse of Jesus found in John's Gospel, chapters 14-17. When a person is saying farewell or, even more profoundly, when someone is about to let go of the precious gift of life, certainly we would want to share those things we hold most deeply. This is what Jesus did as He assured his disciples of his unending love for them. Jesus was sharing with them and with us what mattered most to him; He was modelling what all of us are capable of doing – and not just at the very end of life! Whenever a person opens his/her heart and encounters another person eager to listen, the Holy Spirit is present and the Jesus "experience" lives on.

#### LOVING RATHER THAN JUDGING

Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said, "If you judge people you have no time to love them." In this I hear a call to acceptance and compassion rather than judgment and correction. How well I remember those exciting and formative days of the '60's and 70's when I was fortunate to encounter the thought of Rogers and Rahner, one named Carl, the other Karl, both of whom shaped my ideas and thoughts significantly. It was Carl Rogers who opened my therapeutic mind to the possibility, better yet the desirability, of encountering another person with unconditional positive regard, which, according to Rogers simply meant "...accepting and supporting another exactly as they are, without evaluating or judging them." While surely there is another side to meaningful conversations, namely, the opportunity to offer constructive,

**“Mutual sharing affirms both parties in the conversation and thus opens the door for the possibility of ongoing sharing and openness.”**

helpful criticism, nonetheless, how profound it is when, in our sharing, we mutually experience compassion born of patient acceptance and pure love. How refreshing when we are able to share an idea, a fear, or our deepest hopes and dreams without worrying about judgment or rejection.

Karl Rahner adds to this loving encounter with his great optimism about how each of us is so uniquely, divinely loved by God; that as we remember we are meeting each other in the very presence of love itself, God! Sensitivity to the mystery of His presence opens us up to see the mystery of myself and the “other” before me. This insight is most important. I am much more able to love and not judge, to show compassion and acceptance, rather than criticism or negativity, when I remember that in each person I encounter the mystery of God who is love. In other words, at the heart of meaningful conversation and true human encounter is the discovery that we are in the presence of God. I was reminded by one of the senior members of my Passionist Community that there is a tremendous graciousness in the mystery of who God is and how God loves us. Graciousness! What a wonderful concept when reflecting on what can happen when people engage in loving and meaningful conversations – an invitation to be gracious!

Lastly, being a good listener requires something else that is important, namely, a willingness to be selfless and not preoccupied with one’s own

needs. This kind of listening requires a breaking away from what has become so commonplace in our contemporary society where much of daily interaction is based on a kind of “what’s in it for me” mentality. And happily, in meaningful conversations, marked by careful and sensitive listening, there are great rewards for everyone. Precisely because we “forget” ourselves, no one goes away empty!

### **WILLINGNESS TO RESPOND**

It goes without saying that one of the components of meaningful conversation is the element of response. After sharing deeply and humbly about something that truly matters most to us, what can be more affirming than to have our vulnerability acknowledged with loving acceptance by the one who has been listening? The listener may agree and affirm or perhaps offer a gentle critique that could lead to further clarity or new insight. There may even be honest to goodness disagreement. But most of all, in meaningful conversations, there is discovery; both parties can understand a situation and/or themselves in a new way. St. Theresa of Avila said that humility is acknowledging the truth of things. Sometimes that truth is found in a way that has totally eluded me, until another’s suggestions open up a whole new way of looking at things. Mutual sharing affirms both parties in the conversation and thus opens the door for the possibility of ongoing sharing and openness. Frequently I have shared with others



what was significant and important in my life. Sometimes their response to what I shared was not necessarily agreement with my own ideas but their honesty led me to deeper insights into what was happening in my life. I will never forget when, as a young priest, I was deeply desirous of working with Hispanic immigrants, yet, the needs of my community were calling me to a ministry that I had not even thought of! Gratefully, thanks to the wisdom of other loving people, I was able to see how God was calling me to a new direction, to take a different path. Thank God that these trusted people were willing to be honest and challenging and not simply sympathetic and affirming. Sometimes we just need to hear the truth about something from another's point of view! Accepting the truth is not always easy; but it is made much easier when we know that the other is speaking from a generous and loving place.

### THE GIFTS THAT COME FROM MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

Like all good things in life, meaningful encounters with others bestow their own special blessings or gifts, too many to enumerate. Consistently, one of the most significant gifts is gratitude. Even when sharing is marked with moments of difficulty or challenge, at the end of it, there is a sense of being grateful for the encounter. Thankfulness brings joy to the heart, and out of that joy comes hope. In decades of priestly ministry after sincere sharing, I have always walked away with feelings of gratitude, joy, and hope.

Listening and sharing with another person reminds us we are not alone on this journey toward the Kingdom. Meaningful encounters help us realize that we are united in the one same mystery of divine love, linked together in our



blessed humanity as fellow travelers. This is just as true for shared joy as it is for shared sorrows. I have been fortunate to make a number of trips to the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes as a chaplain with the Knights and Dames of Malta. On each pilgrimage there are many people who are sick, even facing the inevitable outcome of a terminal illness. Yet, the true miracle of Lourdes is that everyone, “malades” and companions alike, realizes that they are not alone. As we share our joys and sorrows, we discover the peaceful comfort of remembering we are never, ever alone.

Finally, and perhaps most profound of all, in truly meaningful encounters we experience the presence of God – God in me and God in you. This is what the Hindi word “Namaste” signifies: the divine light in me bows to the divine light in you. Through our encounter we recognize God “present” in the moment, dwelling within each of us.

## IN CONCLUSION

I began this reflection on meaningful conversations with the hope that by sharing my experiences in retreat and preaching ministry I would be able to shed some light on the mystery that “happens” when we open ourselves to each other in the presence of God. Thanks be to God, I have been blessed to share conversations with others in moments of illness, loss, and great sorrow. Just as remarkably, I have been invited into intimate times of birth, marriage, family celebration, as well as all the challenges that people face in our elusive, rapidly changing world. What a privilege it has been to witness so many people of all ages face inner fears, times of questioning self-worth or personal value, or issues pertaining to human sexuality and the meaning of love in a sometimes cold and impersonal world.

I hope that some of the characteristics that I have tried to enunciate are meaningful to the reader and that these qualities are seen as something worthy of striving for when we are blessed to encounter one another in significant opportunities for dialogue.

Wherever the future takes any of us in this life and no matter what happens with technology, truly meaningful conversations will always be a steady consolation and guiding light, for they keep us fully human and true to our potential to share divinity.

Images: St. Paul of the Cross Retreat Center, Detroit Michigan

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Fr. Brennan lists a number of qualities necessary for both speaker and listener in communication that is meaningful and fruitful. Did you agree with his list? Did you think of other qualities you would have added or might you have highlighted certain traits in a different way?
2. He stressed the absolute necessity of both parties being honest and articulating and accepting the truth – even if painful. Think of a relationship in your life where you have encountered such honesty when you opened your heart. Consider also a time you had the courage to speak the truth in love as you listened to someone's struggle. Thank God for such honesty!
3. Although he did not say it this simply, Fr. Brennan seemed to imply that when we are aware of God's presence within each other, conversations will almost always be meaningful, even revelatory. Is it your experience that God "shows up" when both parties are open?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fr. Pat Brennan C.P. has been a vowed Passionist religious for over fifty years and a priest for forty-five years. During this time he has served as a seminary formation director, master of novices, and retreat director at St. Paul of the Cross Retreat Center in Detroit and over nineteen years at Mater Dolorosa Retreat Center in Sierra Madre, California. In addition, Fr. Brennan has completed graduate studies in Clinical Psychology, as well as D. Min. studies at the Catholic Theological Union of Chicago, specializing in preaching in a multi-cultural setting.



# CONVERSATIONS AS DOORWAYS FOR CONVERSION

Dr. Janet K. Ruffing, RSM



## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “CONVERSATION?”

Conversation is such an ordinary human activity that we take it for granted, yet most of us have not really thought through all its potential, complexity and challenges. Given our technological environment, more and more of us are rapidly losing the art of conversation. We do so at the peril of diminishing our humanity and our connection with one another. Various forms of dialogue and conversation have long been essential components of education and the development of relational and empathic skills. Face-to-face conversation builds connection, cooperation, and shared insight. Conversation makes possible conversion on a personal and communal level; we cannot have genuine change without conversation on many levels.

The *Miriam Webster Dictionary* [2018] defines conversation as “informal talk involving two people or a small group of people.” It includes an “oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas.” Basically, talking with one another.

According to its Latin roots the word conversation means “turning toward one another.” Some form of conversation has always been integral to educational processes as a way of helping people of all ages articulate explicitly what people already know implicitly.

Such conversations need to be distinguished from “argument” or “debate” which are competitive forms of interaction, governed by a different set of rules. Rather than looking for a cooperative or collaborative way of connecting with one another, an argument often becomes verbal combat. By its very nature an argument requires the speaker to persuade the listener/reader through a coherent series of reasoned statements that move from a premise to a logical conclusion. An argument frequently progresses antagonistically, ending in a win-lose outcome between the parties. It is competitive and minimizes the areas of agreement or the common ground between the parties. Rather than resulting in a shared understanding of a problem, a situation, or simply the life-world of one’s conversation partner, someone “wins” and someone “loses.”

### GENUINE CONVERSATIONS CONNECT

Conversation brings the conversants together, often furthering the mutual understanding of a question, a situation, a relationship, an issue or an experience. Conversation not only opens the mind

but also touches the heart. Observations, feelings, new information, facts, and ideas coalesce into relationships that are strong enough to set aside any tendency toward domination. Cooperative conversation expands one’s own knowledge to seek points of agreement and understanding that respect and incorporate the viewpoints of the other conversant.

Face-to-face conversation is the way each of us learned to relate to family members and to understand the environments around us. Within the family, hopefully children experience an empathic connection that can also replicate itself with other care-givers, relatives, teachers, coaches and friends. In the proper environment, a child learns to interpret the feelings of others and respond appropriately. Even after a child begins school and gains some autonomy through reading and education, healthy emotional learning continues in settings where respectful dialogue is encouraged.

At this time in our culture, though, these relational ways of experiencing self and others are diminishing because technology inserts screens into our relational worlds. Families are finding it harder to maintain their emotional connections with one another because of iPhones and other devices; people easily become addicted to on-line activities of one kind or another at times when families used to engage with each other in spontaneous and undistracted ways. Sherry Turkle’s research shows that the simple presence of a phone on the table - even when it is turned off - distracts and diminishes the conversation at the table and the affective connections of those present. [2015, 368]

“It takes courage to start a conversation. But if we don’t start talking to one another, nothing will change.”

## CONVERSATION OPENS DOORS

Conversation is not only about building relationships. Conversation is also, according to Margaret Wheatley, “the natural way that humans think together.” “When we ...don’t talk to one another, we stop acting intelligently. We give up the capacity to think about what’s going on. We don’t act to change anything. We become passive and allow others to tell us what to do. We forfeit our freedom. We become objects, not people. When we don’t talk to each other, we give up our humanity.” Drawing on the wisdom of Paulo Freire, Wheatley continues, “It takes courage to start a conversation. But if we don’t start talking to one another, nothing will change.”

Through conversation, we discover how to transform the world. When people talk, they can develop strategies to change local and even international situations. Often creative ideas and the impetus for changing harmful situations arise spontaneously in conversation. Once a shared understanding of a situation arises, conversation leads to brainstorming and then acting together to address the problem.

Connecting to others through conversation helps us realize that others are having the same struggles we are enduring. This kind of shared understanding frees us from a sense of isolation and leads us to the reassurance that others see, feel, and understand the situation in a way similar to our own perceptions. Sharing of information expands our understanding of the situation and we can decide on a common response. Wheatley challenges us all to recognize and change learned habits which impair our capacity for conversation about addressing pressing issues that require collective action.

## TEMPTATIONS AND FRUSTRATION OF TECHNICAL “CONVERSATION”

If Sherry Turkle is correct, the arrival of the iPhone in 2007 began an even greater breakdown in the practice of conversation as technologically-

developed countries promised 24-hour connectivity. This has led to many finding themselves alone on their phones even when in the same room with others. Her research discovered that “in the past twenty years, we’ve seen a forty-percent decline in the markers for empathy among college students, most of it within the past ten years. [2011, 21] In her best-selling book, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, she makes a passionate case for the necessity of re-learning the practice of conversation – actual, even messy, conversations instead of the superficiality and supposed non-intrusive act of texting. The onslaught of endless information from various feeds and the temptation of efficiency and time-management lead to avoiding real conversation. [2015, 22-3] Throughout her book, Turkle documents the losses involved in this situation: “...frequent use of social media leads to feelings of depression and social anxiety. And trouble with empathy. ...Those who use social media the most have difficulty reading human emotions, including their own. ...Yet we are resilient. Face-to-face conversation leads to greater self-esteem and an improved ability to deal with others.” [2015,25]

There is enormous paradox here. The addictive effect of the iPhone also leads to an inability to be alone. Tolerance for solitude diminishes. The illusion of never being alone because someone is always reachable on the phone decreases one’s capacity for self-reflection and the happy solitude of direct relationship with the natural world or with one’s own inner world. The effect is that: “If we are unable to be alone, we will be more lonely.” [2015, 23] Turkle is by no means anti-technology, but rather pro-conversation. She advocates recovering the art of real conversation and face-to-face interaction sans technology as the remedy for the deficits too many people of all ages are incurring through the addictive and unrestrained use of technology.

## SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AS “CONVERSATION”

While there are many ways of fostering genuine, spontaneous conversation, the pastoral ministry of spiritual direction can offer many positive insights for opening up unique “channels” of communication. Therapeutic conversations and spiritual direction have long been opportunities for self-reflection and healing through conversation. Therapy offers the client an empathic, skilled listener, who helps the patient reflect more deeply on his or her own core story and positive or negative memories of formative relationships. The therapist unconditionally receives the client’s narrative, feelings, and interpretations and then offers suggestions, questions and empathic connection. The therapist creates a positive environment that supports the client in the work of repairing wounds, expanding the patient’s repertoire of relational responses in the present and for the future. There remains significant asymmetry in this relationship because the focus is on the client and his/her story; by definition, the therapist remains objective and “professional.”

The Spiritual Director also maintains a similar asymmetry yet there is something unique which happens in direction as opposed to therapy. The director offers a hospitable environment in which the directee reflects on his/her on-going experience of God. Over time, this ongoing conversation becomes a spiritual autobiography. Together, director and directee are engaged in an interpretive process through their regular conversations with one another. Most significantly, as two believers listen and reflect, God is a third on-going presence within the relationship: both conversational partners discover the Divine presence. God’s Spirit is influencing both director and directee as the conversation unfolds. While the spiritual director is fully engaged in the conversation, the director and directee both realize the ultimate director is the Holy Spirit.

An on-going spiritual direction relationship supports the directee’s commitment to spending time in prayer

and personal reflection. This regular conversation also contributes to the directee’s interpretation and understanding of experiences of both solitude and community and the felt presence of God within them. Within the conversation, God becomes one of the interlocutor’s, often named or referred to by both director and directee and sometimes felt as tangibly present in the session. The entire process takes place under the eye of God and under the loving influence of God.

The focus and subject matter of the conversation is the directee’s experience and reflection about it. This focus creates a space for the directee to experience without having to take turns with the director; at times, however, the director may join in the directee’s story or introduce a new story that relates to what is being shared. Throughout, spiritual direction is a collaborative process. The two conversants focus on the directee’s experiences. At first, this can seem strange to a directee because of the normal expectation of mutually interactive conversation.

## SOMETHING NEW EMERGES

This interactive exploration of the directee’s experience allows something new to emerge for both director and directee. It is the nature of human knowledge that each person (director as well as directee) is limited in some way. When these limits are recognized in a genuine search for understanding of the mind and heart of the directee this can lead to the discovery of new questions to explore. Previous and often long-held assumptions no longer necessarily limit possibilities. New experiences and insights no longer fit an old frame of reference. They require people to change their minds and actions. In religious terms we speak of conversion. Conversations can initiate conversions and also help interpret a conversion already underway; continuing conversations support the changes in thinking and behaviors needed to consolidate and integrate the conversion. In this process, the director’s own point of view, or taken-for-granted assumptions, are challenged by the directee and require the director



to join the directee in understanding the directee's experience, and in the process, the director's own assumptions are also changed; he/she also experiences some type of conversion.

This is how the process of understanding unfolds. The experience of God's grace in the directee can contradict a deeply held conviction. It may be difficult for the directee to adjust to this new reality. For instance, if a directee tends to relate to God as if a perfectionistic parent, and God reveals Godself to the directee in tenderness and love, the directee might say something like, "I did not know God was like that." As the director supports the directee holding onto this new awareness and understanding without fear or trying to run away from it, the

directee gradually grows more comfortable and confident about a new understanding of God.

### DIRECTOR AND DIRECTEE GROWING TOGETHER

In the "flow" of this conversational interchange, both participants relinquish some prior assumptions and together arrive at an understanding or interpretation that neither would have discovered without the conversation.

In the spiritual direction conversation both parties are growing in their understanding of the experience being shared and its implications. The spiritual director is continually learning more about how God affects and influences different directees. The spiritual and ethical decisions of the directee to the new understanding can often console and inspire the director. Although the director has not been talking about his or her personal experience of God or growth in faith like the directee has, nevertheless, the director benefits from witnessing the directee's deepening growth in intimacy with God.

In the process of seeking to understand the directee's life in God, the director's capacity for helping others deepens, and the director may also personally benefit from the graced experience of the goodness of directees, their courage in confronting and growing through challenging and difficult situations. In describing these experiences of challenge and grace, the directee often notices aspects about their experience that he or she knew only implicitly but had not yet named.

Entering into such conversations requires the capacity and willingness to be vulnerable within the mutual influence of the spiritual direction relationship. The practice of spiritual direction is an on-going commitment to living with a certain spiritual intensity so as to have something to say month after month. The regularity of spiritual direction conversations exerts a gentle pressure to be faithful to personal and communal prayer and a life of compassionate service to and with others. There are ups and downs, challenges, and set-backs, luminous experiences of grace and connection, and hopefully deepening awareness of how God acts in and through the directee's life. In the process of talking about this broad range of graced experiences, directees deepen their awareness of how God is acting in and through them, how they are growing in their ability to compassionately accompany others in their life challenges. The Gospels come alive for

both director and directee as their conversations unfold and the lights and shadows of these graced lives manifest over time and become formulated in the spiritual oral autobiography that the directee elaborates over time that has been heard into story by the director who has been connecting the dots over time. [Ruffing, 2011]

For directees these conversations support them in creating a rhythm of reflection about the grace experienced in the interval between sessions. While there may be stress in ministry or work, illness and setbacks, a peaceful serenity and quiet, steady confidence emerges. Spiritual direction conversations console and comfort, guiding the directee to recognize the deep presence of God in these events and help the directee remember the entire circle of grace.

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Often we discover and understand the things we are passionate about when we connect with another person, a small circle of friends or colleagues. We discover that we are not alone, that others may be experiencing the same stresses and struggles, hopes and dreams. As we engage in conversation, we arrive together at a more focused and shared consciousness. By connecting and sharing in various conversations with those with whom we feel safe enough to be

There have always been pitfalls in social conversation. Some people need a stage and expect others to give them a platform upon which to demonstrate their superior knowledge about a narrow field or their encyclopedic control of much information. These may know a great deal about many things, but they are rarely interested in the other person's views, feelings or knowledge. Conversation partners are meant to engage with



ourselves, we discover that we are not alone, that others have similar joys, concerns, and passions. When those conversations coalesce around matters of some importance beyond ourselves, we are far more likely to move toward concrete actions that may result in significant social changes.

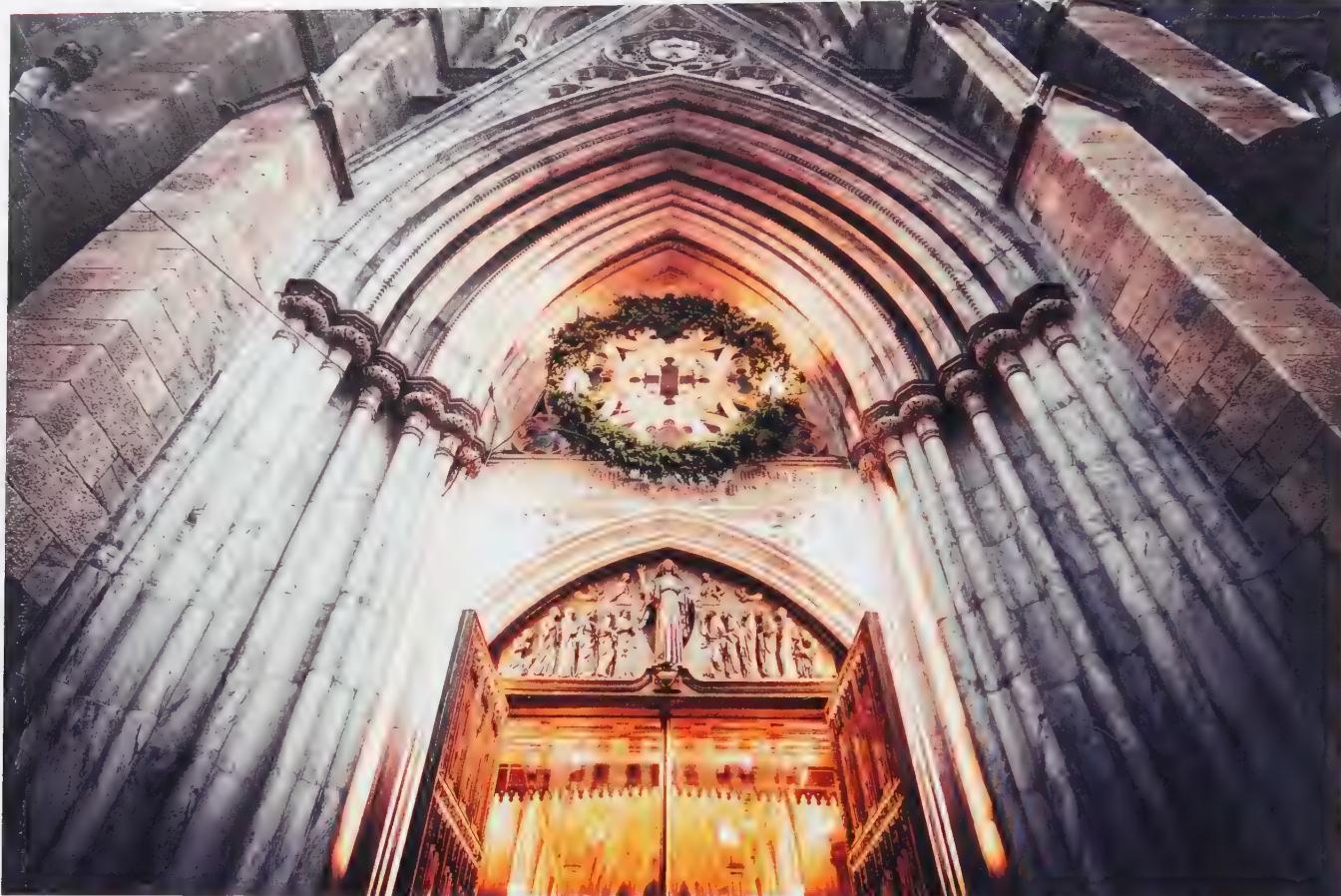
### FACE-TO-FACE CONVERSATIONS

The theme of this issue of *Human Development* is "Meaningful Conversations." The theme implies there has to be something more significant about these conversations than the mundane conversations or meetings that bore us or tire us from much talk and little action. Unsuccessful conversations occur when the participants cannot find a common ground of interests, experience, and expertise. What is it we ardently long for? If Sherry Turkle is right regarding how people have been changed and are changing through technology, there is an urgent need to re-learn (or for younger people to learn for the first time) how to engage in face-to-face conversation.

one another in a mutual give-and-take, not lecture one another nor judge or evaluate the other. The emergence of the manipulation of on-line communication that is aimed at sowing division, tricking us into thinking that disinformation is true, eroding confidence in reliable information and knowledge that is scientifically evidence based and true, gives us pause.

### CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges of technology and the perennial difficulties of conversation, there are also promising signs that some of us, at least, are seeking to engage in genuine conversations. The emergence of the TED Talks, while not conversation per se, have become conversation starters. The format of short, focused reflections on topics a person is passionate about in a friendly environment has become very popular. Krista Tippet's "On Being" is also very popular for reflective people who want to expand their understanding of a variety of topics that are presented in a congenial way. Many



people appreciate the way that Tippet conducts her interviews in a conversational format, not simply questioning her guests.

The art of conversation requires a certain altruism and generosity of spirit. It takes effort to discover the common ground for conversation in diverse groups. Meaningful conversation requires a genuine interest in other people and a willingness to discover the common ground shared by both parties. Meaningful conversation is not only about topics but about connection. So long as we are unable or unwilling to expand beyond our ideological niches, our conversations will suffer. So long as we fail to discover and celebrate the many diversities among us, our humanity will be further impoverished unless we commit ourselves to turning these differences into new forms of conversation and connection. It is important for each of us and for society that we learn (or relearn) ways of engaging with one another in meaningful conversations that change our minds and

our patterns of relating to one another.

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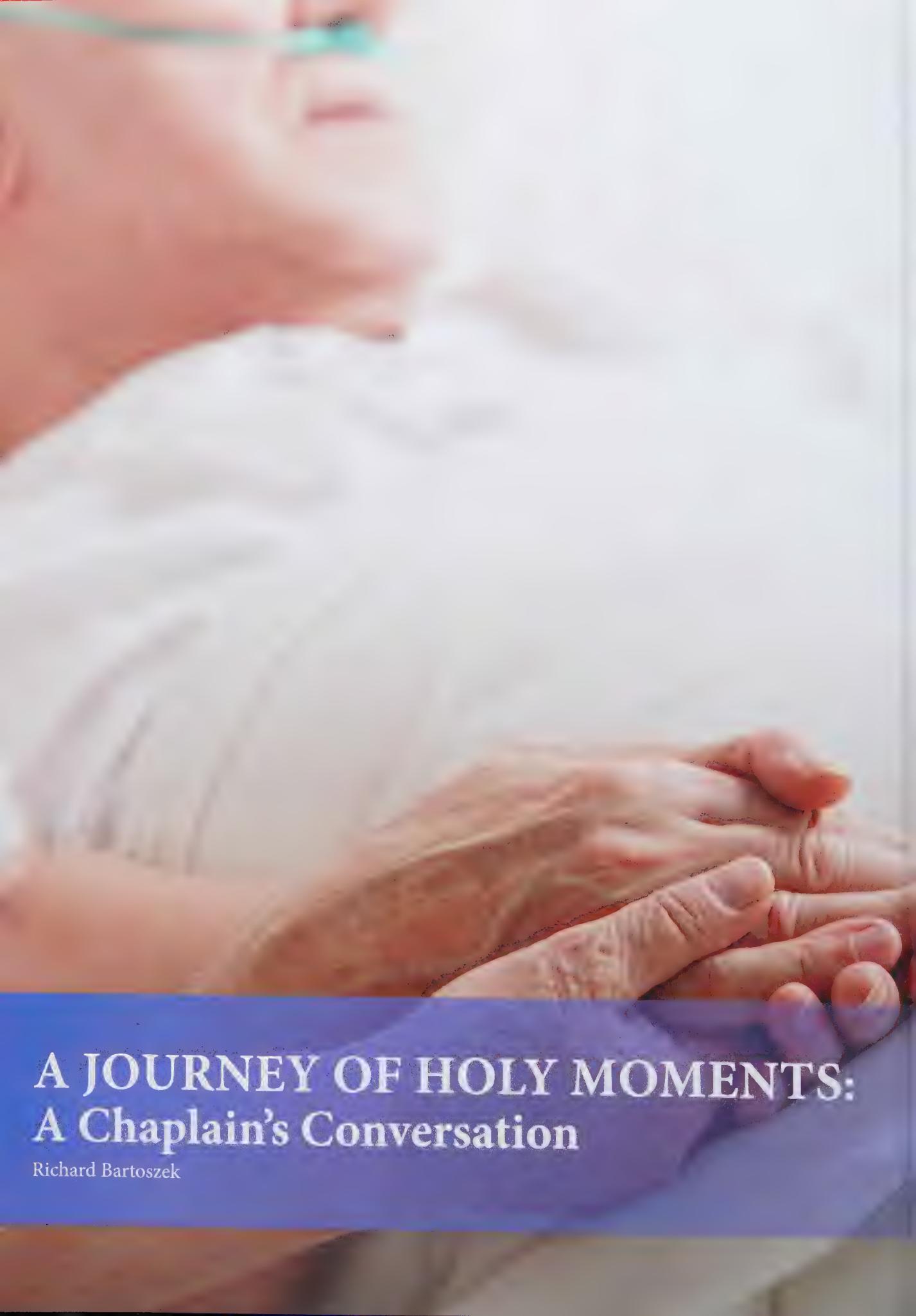
## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Dr. Ruffing speaks about the transforming power which emerges through genuine conversation – healing of past misunderstanding, emerging of new insights, the gift of knowing “connection” with others. Reflect on a particular conversation which helped change your life. What factors made it all come together?
2. Theoretically, technology can foster conversations across the miles yet it can also stifle actual face-to-face conversation! Is “technology” impeding you from having genuine and sustained conversations? What might you do to improve this situation in your own life, family home or workplace?
3. Having written extensively on spiritual direction, naturally Dr. Ruffing points out the unique potential of spiritual direction for growth and change on the part of both director and directee. Are you currently engaged in direction – either as director and/or directee? Reflect on the dynamic at work in your own experience as speaker and/or listener. Do you sense the presence of the Holy Spirit in your conversations? How does the direction experience impact your prayer life? If you are not currently in direction, might it be helpful? Are you willing to take the risk of engaging in the process?
4. Throughout her article Dr. Ruffing also makes references to “group-sharing” as settings for meaningful conversations and thus, doorways for potential personal or communal growth, change or conversion. Many of us are part of therapy groups, some find meaningful conversation in Scripture or faith-sharing groups, still others are perhaps in professional discussion groups. Evaluate your own commitment of time, openness/self-revelation, patient listening, etc. If not in such a group, might it be timely to consider such a possibility?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janet K. Ruffing, RSM, PhD, is Professor of the Practice of Spirituality and Ministerial Leadership at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, CT since 2010. She chaired the graduate program in Spirituality and Spiritual Direction at Fordham University from 1986-2009, when she became Professor Emerita there. She was a founding member of Spiritual Directors International as well as serving as an officer in the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. She is also a Member of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.



# A JOURNEY OF HOLY MOMENTS: A Chaplain's Conversation

Richard Bartoszek

## UNDERSTANDING THE DYING: BEING THERE

When I was in my last year of theology, all I could think about was being a parish priest and one day becoming a Pastor. In my journey, I met a dear friend, a Sister of Charity from Cincinnati, and she taught me the expression "God writes straight with crooked lines." She was indeed referring to my journey and the turns it had taken that I never expected. In my twenty-nine years as a priest for the Archdiocese of Detroit, over twenty-two of them have been spent in Health Care ministry and the like. I say "the like" because the beginning of this journey started in my first assignment as parochial vicar in an inner-city parish where I became immersed in ministry to people living and dying with HIV/AIDS and supporting their loved ones.



The most grace filled moments of this journey have been with those in their last days preparing to go home to God. I had taken classes on Death and Dying in the seminary, and attended some workshops, but nothing teaches us like being there. Just recently I attended an hour presentation at my hospital which was done by a volunteer for staff, volunteers and anyone interested. The presentation was about death and dying and had no real title; it was presented by the man who helped create this exercise to sensitize people to what dying people are going through.

We were given twenty-four slips of paper in four different colors; on each of the blue slips we had to list six people living or deceased who were important to us; on each of the yellow, we listed six different articles that were important to us; on each of the pink we put things we enjoyed doing; and, on each of the green, we listed places we enjoyed being. The process continued by the instructor reading to us that we have just been told by our doctor that we have a rapid form of cancer that will only give us six more months of life, with a decline in our own independence as time goes on. Next we were told to eliminate two sheets in each category, to crumble them up and realize they were now gone. The instructor continued by reading a few more paragraphs to say our ability to function independently is rapidly decreasing. At this time assigned people in the room came to our places and they eliminated two more of each of our sheets in each category.

This was meant to help us realize that when people are going through this process they do not always have the option of what they are losing during the period leading up to their death. In the next phase of the exercise we had to eliminate one of each of the two things we had left in each category. In the final choice we had to eliminate everything but the last blue paper that had a person's name on it, who would be the last person that we would be with before our death. This was really a mindful experience of what people go through and how little control they may

have at the end of their life. In my experience, it is no surprise that those who have a relationship with the Lord have a much different experience than those who lack such a relationship.

One of the holiest moments of this journey had to do with a woman named Loretta, a very dignified, holy and compassionate woman, a retired nurse, mother of seven and grandmother of many. Loretta was also my sacristan at the hospital chapel and taught me more about trusting in the Holy Spirit than any theology class I ever had.

Loretta had been missing a day here and there, but then it became weeks. One day she was admitted to the hospital for more advanced tests and care. She did not think that I knew she was being treated for a blood disorder. One night I was called to the hospital around 2:00 a.m. for the death of a police officer. I prayed with the family, helped them make necessary arrangements and saw them to the exit. I then took a walk to all the nursing stations to see if there was any need of my services. As I passed Loretta's room I saw her sitting on her bed. I walked in and said, "It's kind of late to be sitting here daydreaming isn't it?" She looked right at me and said, "I am dying." She had just gotten the news that day that her time was very short. I sat down beside her and put an arm around her and held her and said "Yes, you are." We sat in silence for a few minutes and I said, "So what are you looking forward to as you prepare to go home to God?" She said, "I haven't given that a lot of thought."

I never knew her husband or her brother, a Monsignor, but she had talked about them a lot as she visited with me while I vested for Mass. I told her I think they are waiting for you and so is the Lord. I reminded her of how well she served and trusted in the Lord in so many ways. We talked for a half hour and I told her I would be back in the morning. In the days that followed, she was moved to a private room. She had been so faithful in helping me, I wanted to help her in any possible way through this journey



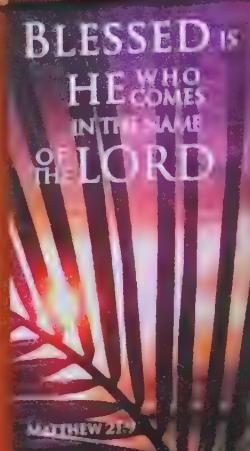
home. I asked her if she would like to have mass with her family on the weekend and she was very pleased, so the planning began to get all of her children and grandchildren to the hospital for a family liturgy. We gathered in a large room and her nurse and family rolled her in, sitting up in her bed as regal and proud as a woman in a parade. She had a bright yellow bed jacket on and a smile that beamed from ear to ear. For the beginning of the liturgy, I asked her to hold a bowl of holy water and explained to her that she was the font of life and faith for the people in the room. I asked all of her family to come up to her and to bless themselves with the water. As her family approached her bed, they had tears coming down their cheeks. But she did not; only a huge smile as she looked into the very soul of each family member. Her family took part in the readings, music and prayers of the faithful. I read the Gospel from John 12:23 – 28, about the grain of wheat; I looked right at her and explained how she had been the most important teacher this family ever had. I mentioned the gifts

she handed on to them, most especially the gift of faith.

I then gave her a basket of wheat and asked her to give each person a piece of wheat to remind them always of the gifts she had planted in the garden of their hearts. When the liturgy was over, she thanked me, I told her the whole ceremony was a risk, but I lived by her words and trusted in the Holy Spirit. She replied with a wink, "You got it!" The next day she slipped into a coma and died two days later. There was no fear in this woman of great faith who spent her life serving the Lord.

#### A MAN WITH AIDS

Not all situations are that peaceful. Three years after I was ordained and still in a parish, a young man I was called to go see was in the final stages of AIDS and had struggled for years with his relationship with God. I went to see him after visiting hours. My first



gesture after saying hello, was to reach out and touch him, so he knew I was not afraid to be around him. As I held his hand, he said "I am not the touchy-feely type so don't do that." I smiled and just stood at his bedside carrying on small talk. He explained he wasn't at his best and that the reason was he had been given too much morphine that day by mistake. He invited me to come to his home which I agreed to only if I could bring dinner. We had developed a ministry in the parish providing meals to the infirmed and dying in their homes. A week after he went home I made plans to visit him and his partner and bring dinner. I can still remember how hot the apartment was; he was always cold and needed the warmth.

He brought up the issue that he did not feel accepted by the Church because he was gay. I assured him that I could understand his feelings but, somewhere he may have been misled. I used the old reliable line God hates the sin, but loves the sinner. I then asked him, "So, you feel loved by God?" He could not imagine being loved by God because he had been led to believe he was evil. I pointed out all the ways that I had witnessed God loving him in just my two visits with him. As I was about to leave, he said "So what is going to happen to me?" I knew where he was going, so I played along with it and said, "Well you are going to go to bed and I am going to get in my cold car and drive back across town." He looked me straight in the eye and said "I mean when I die? Am I going to hell?" In my most serious tone of voice I said, "Why would you think that? Haven't you ever heard of God's mercy and forgiveness? What day did you wake up and decide you were going to be gay?" He looked at me and said, "Why would I have chosen a life like this where I am a victim of discrimination and hate?" I said, "Maybe instead of focusing on God's punishment, you might focus on God's love and mercy on you." I reiterated the gifts he had, and how he used those gifts for others, especially his nieces and nephew. I pointed out the love of God in the people in his life and how God was present to him through them. The evening ended with him

asking to receive the Eucharist the next time I would come to visit.

A week later, I was heading there and just as I was leaving called his home, only to find out, an ambulance was taking him back to the hospital. I met him as they were bringing him in, and his partner arrived minutes later. Once he was placed in a holding cubicle in the emergency area, I stated what a shock this was. He needed to sit up on the gurney to breathe easier, but he kept sliding down; he looked at me and said, "Can you lift me up?" Remembering our first encounter in that same hospital I said "No, you're not a touchy-feely person." As I picked him up, it was obvious, he was over that problem, but then he looked at both of us and said, "I think I am going to die today." I asked if he wanted his family there and he declined. He asked for the Sacrament of the Sick and the Eucharist, which I had brought with me, and once again we prayed. He was very much at peace. I left to go back to the rectory. It was a thirty-minute drive home; just as I arrived, a call came for me....he had died....very peacefully.

The hospital where I currently work was originally owned by the Sisters of Bon Secours. In 2007 they sold their Michigan facilities to the Beaumont Health System. The Sisters who always had a strong commitment to the dying, left a major impression on me. Within a couple of years after they sold the Hospital I approached the hospital president to create an in-patient hospice unit, to give our dying patients and their families the comfort needed in the last days of their life.

## WILL I BE FORGIVEN?

In one of those rooms was a man in his fifties. He knew his time was limited and he had not been a regular church goer, and was now facing the last days of his life. We talked about his life and I pointed out how God had truly blessed him. In our conversation, I asked if he had any particular concerns. He was worried about whether God would forgive him. I

assured him God loved him and pointed to his wife, focusing on how they knew the love of God through each other. Even though his wife was there, he focused on what he was sorry for in his life and then, we prayed together. I anointed him and explained that his sins were forgiven through this Sacrament and that he would be OK. He asked, "Are you sure?" I told him I was very sure and that I would see him tomorrow. He died that night, quite suddenly and unexpectedly. His wife sent me a note expressing gratitude that her husband died in peace. She said his condition changed that evening, but he was not scared. Even though he did not have a strong relationship with the Lord, he, like most people, was faced with that ultimate question so many have, "Will I be forgiven?"

For those who have had a strong faith life, the dying process is so much different. I once heard the late Henri Nouwen speak at a conference at Loyola in Chicago. The theme of the conference was based on the Gospel of the Transfiguration. Henri spoke about how on that mountain top, Jesus befriended death; in His human nature, He knew from that moment where His journey was leading Him. But He also knew from that mountaintop experience that the Father was with him. People who have a deep relationship with the Lord and live their faith well have a different approach to the holy moment of death. A lady came to the hospital after going through an extended journey of chemotherapy and decided with her family to go into hospice. I had gotten to know her through a couple hospitalizations and we had a mutual connection through her Pastor, a good friend of mine. I celebrated the Sacrament of the Sick with her and her family, as she entered hospice. A few days later her Pastor arrived and again she received the Sacrament of the Sick from him and she looked at me and said "OK, now I am ready to die." She smiled and closed her eyes. I said, "Excuse me, but it might not happen in the next hour or so." She did go home to God a few days later, after all her family had arrived and were able to spend time with

her. She was not afraid; she was ready to go home to God with great hope.

## MICHAEL

One of the most difficult experiences for me as a Chaplain is to be with dying children. I think I can remember the first name of every child I have accompanied on the way to death. One particular situation still stays deep in my heart. My "buddy" Michael was about nine when I met him; he was born with HIV. When Michael's mom gave birth, she found out that she was HIV positive, and so was her newborn son. This was a total shock as Michael has an older brother who was born without the virus. Michael's mom was previously married to an IV drug user, but she never realized the implications for her until the day when Michael was born, as she had been divorced from her first husband for years. The doctors predicted Michael would not live to five years old, but he surpassed that expectation.

Michael was one of the strongest people I ever knew and for the last year of his life he was unable to eat and was on IV fluids. Even though he always had an IV pole, he played soccer, pulling it down the field. There was no stopping Michael. The last months of Michael's life were difficult, and he spent a great deal of time in Children's Hospital in Detroit. I tried to see him as often as I could, which was at least three times a week. As time went on, Michael became weaker and in more pain. Just from talking to him I knew that one day the question about dying was coming, and I asked God to give me the right words at the right time. One night the question came, "Fr. Rich, what is it going to be like when I die?" I knew it was coming, but still a shocker when it came out of the blue. I told him that when that happened, the angels would come to take him home to heaven, and he would see them, but we would not be able to. I reassured him he did not have to be afraid and there would be no more pain. He looked at me and said "OK." A few weeks later I received a call that

Michael's condition was very serious and his family wanted me to come. I arrived to find Michael still alert but his vital numbers were declining rapidly. About fifteen minutes after my arrival, Michael said to me, "Can you see them? They're here!" I thought he was talking about his family, to which I replied, "Yes all your family is here." He replied, "No, the angels, can't you see them? They are all around the room." With a big smile on my face I said "No Michael, only you can see them, but don't be afraid." We prayed and a short time later Michael died very peacefully. It is amazing how gracefully children accept death when it is happening to them and how trusting they are in God.

## TALKING ABOUT DEATH

Death is indeed such a holy moment of our journey, and yet so many people do not want to think about it or talk about it. I remember the elders of my life like grandparents and neighbors saying, "Who wants to die?" Or, as one grandmother said "I have it good here. Why would I want to leave?" and the other grandmother said "Let's not talk about it." The people of my grandparent's generation seemed to have a fear of death. I believe it was the image of God they had been taught which shaped that fear.

My own experience of loss began at an early age. I lost my dad a few days before I turned seven. In my ministry I think so often of what it must have been like on the last days of my father's life knowing he had cancer in a small hospital in 1966, and not being able to see his kids and knowing he wouldn't be there to see them grow up. I am so grateful that we have come such a long way in talking about death and helping people prepare for that holy moment when there is a terminal diagnosis.

In conclusion, I would never have expected to be where I am in ministry. However, I can't imagine doing anything more fulfilling. Hospital ministry presents many opportunities for evangelization and



bringing people back to the faith. It really is not just or fair to expect parish priests to do it all. I am always pleasantly surprised when I see a Pastor visiting the hospital. Having been a Pastor for a short period of time, I am familiar with the endless demands placed upon parish priests. Becoming a certified chaplain with the National Association of Catholic Chaplains was one of the best choices I ever made. One of the best opportunities about being with the NACC is the networking and the programs offered. With the requirement of fifty hours of continuing education each year, one gains new insight into best practices in hospitals other than your own. A good example of that is the "No One Dies Alone Program" founded in Portland, Oregon. We have instituted that program at our hospital and made some changes to fit our community. It has become a benefit for our patients, their families, our staff, but most of all, for the volunteers who sit with the patients. It has helped them live the Gospel "Whatever you did for the least of my brothers or sisters you did for Me."

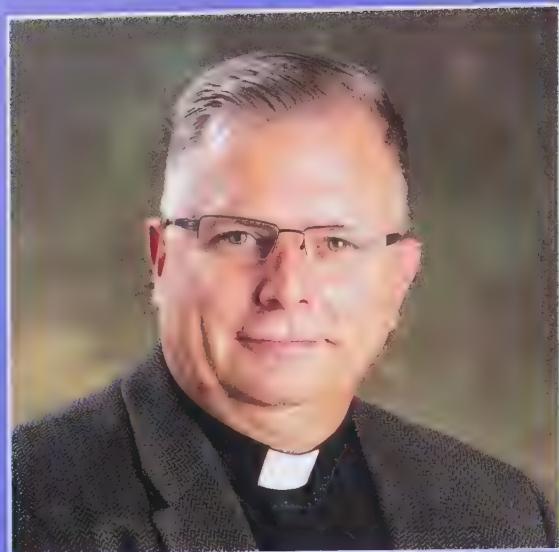
Abraham Lincoln is credited with saying, "It's not the years in our life, but the life in our years." The most important part of our life is to live each day to the fullest. Even dying persons can do that. Sometimes

after a diagnosis that is life changing and challenging the recipients realize what a gift life is. It is so easy to take life for granted.

May we be grateful for the blessings God has bestowed upon us on our journey to the Kingdom, and may we always be assured of God's love for us each day.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Fr. Rich clearly finds much joy and fulfillment in hospital ministry. For him, helping the dying prepare to meet God without fear allows for privileged moments, "holy moments" as he calls them. Recall conversations you have had with dying relatives and friends. Were you yourself touched, healed, strengthened as you stood with another at the doorway to eternity?
2. Try the exercise Fr. Rich describes at the beginning of the essay; in particular think about the specific people you would want near you as you were leaving this world. Prepare for that moment by talking to them now and inviting them to join you for that sacred moment.
3. Consider the insights mentioned by the late Fr. Henri Nouwen regarding Jesus' own preparation for death and dying in the experience of His transfiguration.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fr. Richard J. Bartoszek, M.Div, BCC, was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese Detroit in 1989. He was born on the west side of the state of Michigan in Manistee, where his family still lives today. Rich received his Bachelor's degree from Orchard Lake St. Mary's College and went on to earn his Masters of Divinity from St. John's Provincial Seminary.

In the course of his first assignment at St. Jude in Detroit, he became involved in health care ministry, with a focus toward those living with HIV/AIDS and their loved ones. He is a certified Chaplain and is currently the Director of Spiritual Care at Beaumont Hospital in Grosse Pointe, MI.



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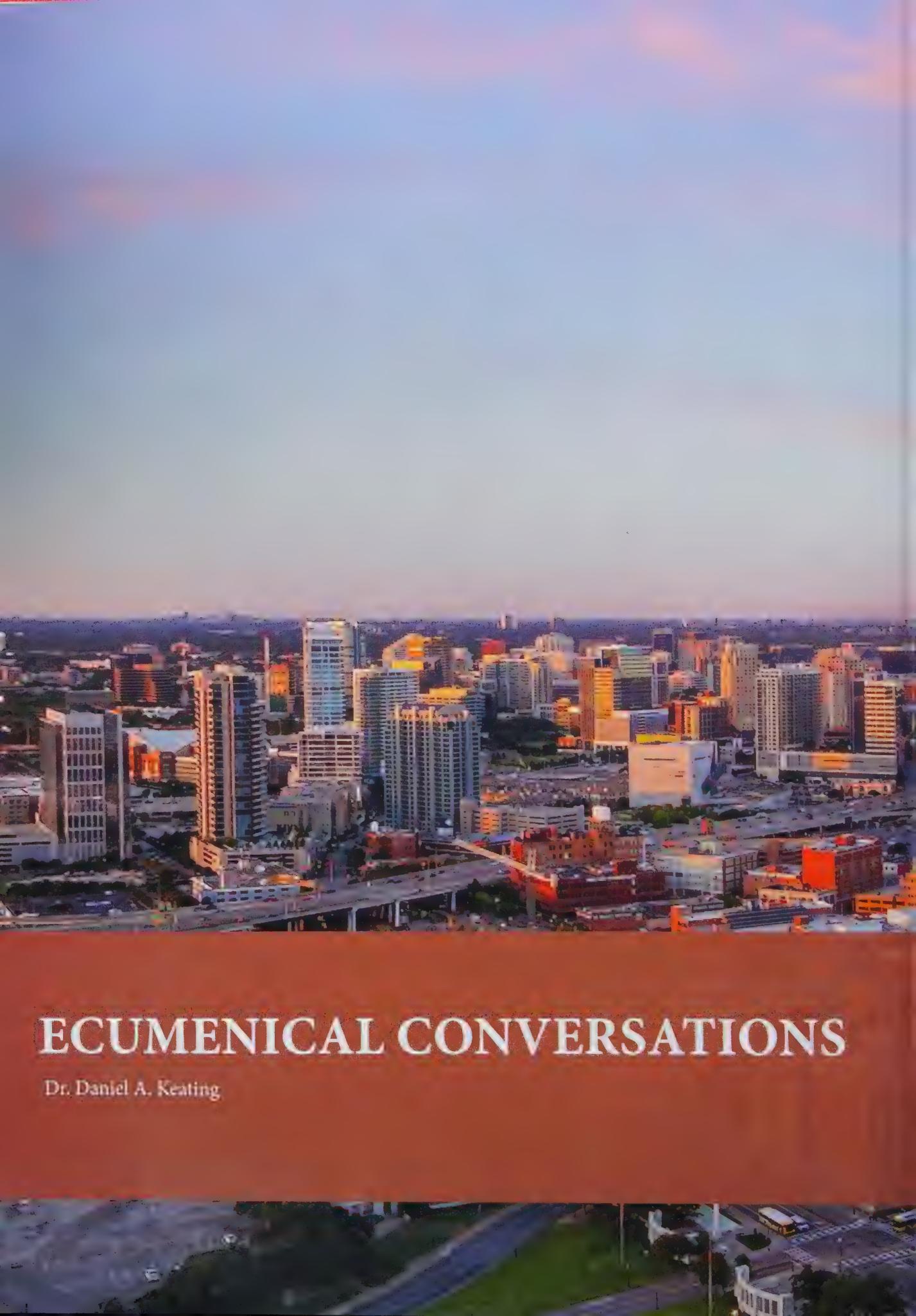
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# ECUMENICAL CONVERSATIONS

Dr. Daniel A. Keating



## FROM CATHOLIC GHETTO TO ECUMENICAL INTERACTION

I grew up in a lively, vigorous Catholic “ghetto” in which nearly all my relationships were with (practicing) Catholic families and friends. Twelve (mostly delightful) years of Catholic school contributed to this experience. The one exception to this Catholic ethos was the family next door to the east: they attended a Lutheran church. The one notable difference between them and us was that we had to go to church on Sunday and they did not. It seemed to me as a young boy that they had a pretty good deal as Lutherans.

But otherwise, apart from attending an Eastern Orthodox Easter vigil liturgy as a teenager, I had no experience or interaction with non-Catholic Christians, despite the fact that they were living and worshiping all around me. The numerous church buildings that dotted the corners of many streets were simply a closed book to me: they were part of a world with which I had no interaction. My parents, however, took ecumenism very seriously. Every Sunday as we gathered for dinner we prayed a special Hail Mary for “Christian unity,” and though I didn’t really know what this meant, the constant rhythm of prayer for this intention made a strong imprint on my mind.

The Catholic ghetto experience changed dramatically when the time came to go off to college. In a summer geology class of over forty students camped in the backwoods of Wyoming, only three of us went to church on Sunday: myself, another Catholic student, and an African-American evangelical Christian. I was no longer in my Catholic environment where I could take things for granted. That summer, for the first time, I had to give witness to what I believed to be a large majority that did not share my views or my experience.

More positively, I found myself connecting with an ecumenical Christian student group. Though Catholics were the majority, there was a strong presence of students from a wide variety of Protestant backgrounds. This was my first real introduction to ecumenical interaction and conversation—and it was a profound experience for me. As I reclaimed and expanded the Catholic faith that had been mine since birth, I found helpers along the path, not only older and wiser Catholics but also Protestant friends who helped me grow in my faith and experience of Christ. Together we studied the Scriptures, prayed for other students in our dorms, shared with each other our struggles, and sought to give a living witness to a common Christian life on campus. This intense experience with other students imprinted on me a commitment to ecumenism and a genuine regard for other Christians that have marked my life ever since.

Two dorm rooming situations contributed greatly to my experience of ecumenical conversation and common living. In my second year, I shared a room with Dave, an intellectually-minded engineering student from a Presbyterian background. Here I learned a great deal about the Reformed tradition stemming from John Calvin. I recall many nights when, after we turned out the lights, we would converse (and sometimes debate) about many topics, often having to do with differences in our Christian conviction and practice. Once again, however, this

year-long conversation blossomed into a friendship that has continued to the present day. We both learned a great deal, not only about the other person but about the Church tradition that he inhabited. Because of my friendship and conversations with Dave, I have an “inside” understanding of the Reformed tradition and how it is lived out in the challenge of each day.

In my third year of college, I roomed with a friend named Hayward, a black Baptist from the south (Dallas); I was a white Catholic from the north (Cleveland). We had precious little in common apart from our firm commitment to Christ and our desire to witness Him. Hayward and I were attempting to bridge two or even three divides at the same time: a confessional divide, a racial divide, and a geographical divide. I would count that year as a great success. It had its moments of lively interaction and humorous cultural misunderstandings, but we became great friends and witnessed together to fellow students from our two different ecclesial and racial worlds.

## FIVE AVENUES FOR ECUMENICAL INTERACTION AND CONVERSATION

For the past nine years I have been teaching the M.Div. course on ecumenism to seminarians and lay commuter students at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. My background for teaching this class came in part from my studies in history and theology, but one major reason I was asked to prepare and teach this class was due to my extensive “lived” experience of ecumenism on the ground. Since my student days, I have been involved with Christians of many backgrounds, and I am a member of an ecumenical lay brotherhood, the Servants of the Word, which includes community-formation, evangelization, and Christian unity in its apostolate.

The students that I teach are marked by a lively faith and an energetic desire to serve Christ in the



Church—and this is wonderful to see. By the time they find their way into my class, they have already received an excellent foundation in theology and (if seminarians) are only a year or so away from ordination. But this is the first time they are directly confronting what the Church teaches and counsels about ecumenism, which is the task of seeking unity among those who call themselves Christians. Most of my students have had some ecumenical interaction and experience, but usually not a great deal, and often this experience was not positive: for some it has left a sour taste in their mouths.

In fact, one of the challenges we face as lay and ordained Catholics is that our views on ecumenism are often strongly colored by very brief ecumenical interactions (whether positive or negative). While experience is essential to the work of ecumenism, experience alone often gives an imbalanced or one-sided perspective on the ecumenical venture. I see my classroom role as informing and energizing ecumenism with the teaching and counsel of the

Church, so that our practice of ecumenism may be integrated with all that we believe and confess as Catholics.

At the start of the class I introduce students to (what I call) five avenues for pursuing the task of ecumenism. Typically, we limit ecumenism to one or two of these avenues—I find it important to open up the field of play by showing that there are several distinctive avenues along which we can make progress toward the goal of Christian unity and united witness to Christ in the world. As we consider the topic of “ecumenical conversations,” it is important to have in view the various contexts in which these conversations can take place.

### **... The Truth of Our Faith**

The first avenue is probably what most people think of when they consider ecumenism: unity in the faith believed and confessed. I participate annually in the National Evangelical-Catholic Dialogue where

our team of four to five Catholics engages with eight to ten Evangelicals from a variety of church denominations, exploring various topics of Christian faith. Our primary task is to discover, through our conversations together, what we hold in common, and at the same time to locate those areas where we have ongoing disagreement. This process is both fascinating and delightful: not only do we learn things about each other that we did not know before, but we gratefully discover common ground that we can pass along to those in our churches. At the same time we run up against real differences that we need to acknowledge in truth, and so recognize that our communion in the faith is real but still imperfect. Many of the best conversations happen during informal times—on breaks or during meals together. Crucially, we have formed genuine friendships with each other as Christians, even as we converse about our agreements and differences.

This engagement around Christian belief is often expressed in shorthand as the “ecumenism of truth.” We cannot circumvent or ignore the “truth” aspect of Christian faith if we are seeking genuine unity. As Pope Saint John Paul II reminds us, “The unity willed by God can be attained only by the adherence of all to the content of revealed faith in its entirety. In matters of faith, compromise is in contradiction with God who is Truth” (Ut Unum Sint, 18). While disunity among Christians has many causes, certainly one of them is disagreement about matters of Christian teaching and doctrine. Another way to state this is that certain ecumenical conversations will be primarily about matters of Christian truth—and we need to be ready to engage these in a constructive way.

### ... Shared Prayer

The second avenue in ecumenism is unity expressed in common prayer. In his Encyclical on Ecumenism, Pope Saint John Paul says that “along the ecumenical path to unity, pride of place certainly belongs to common prayer,” and he recalls that Vatican II identified common prayer with other Christians as “the soul of the whole ecumenical movement” (Ut Unum Sint, 21-22). We cannot yet join in the fullness of common prayer with other Christians (a shared Eucharist), but we can make progress together and express the partial unity we already share by joining together in many forms of common prayer. Praying together for one another, for the mission of the Church, and for the good of the world enhances our unity and opens doors to further kinds of ecumenical conversations. When we pray together, our orientation toward one another changes—we are not simply discussing or debating issues of Christian doctrine, but calling upon God together in prayer. To put this differently, when we together converse with the living God in prayer we experience and express unity in a unique way.

### ... Unity in Action and Mission

The third and fourth avenues of ecumenism are unity in common action and unity in common mission. The first, unity in common action, concerns working together for some good in the wider society. This would include things like working with the poor and homeless or involvement in the prolife movement. This form of activity is often called the “ecumenism of the trenches.” In these cases, we are together not

“The “ecumenism of love” and the “ecumenism of truth,” which both naturally remain very important, must be complemented by an “ecumenism of life.”

to seek Christian unity directly but to promote the common good of the society by uniting our efforts as Christians.

The second, unity in common mission, occurs when we join together to further an aspect of explicit Christian witness in the world. This may happen through a bible study at work or through an Alpha course run by a group of neighboring churches. This form of common activity has an excellence all its own: we experience the joy and delight of witnessing to our faith alongside Christians from other churches, helping others to experience the love of Christ in their lives. Conversations naturally arise from these environments, because the concern for Christian truth is involved. Here we have faith in action, and the conversation often turns to the fruitfulness we can expect from the grace of God at work in our lives, and to the means of grace that are available for this growth. The experience of common mission offers unique opportunities to speak about the way that we experience Christ in our own lives, as we seek together to pass this along to others. Common action and common mission are the avenues where most Catholics have a chance to experience real ecumenical contact and conversation.

### ... The Ecumenism of Life

A fifth and final avenue of Christian unity is the fruit that is borne from a common experience of life. During his tenure as prefect for the Congregation for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper placed special emphasis on this avenue to unity, which he calls an “ecumenism of life” or an “ecumenical spirituality.”

We have to fill the interim stage that we have reached (of a real if not complete church communio) with real life. The “ecumenism of love” and the “ecumenism of truth,” which both naturally remain very important, must be complemented by an “ecumenism of life.” We have to apply all that we have achieved to the

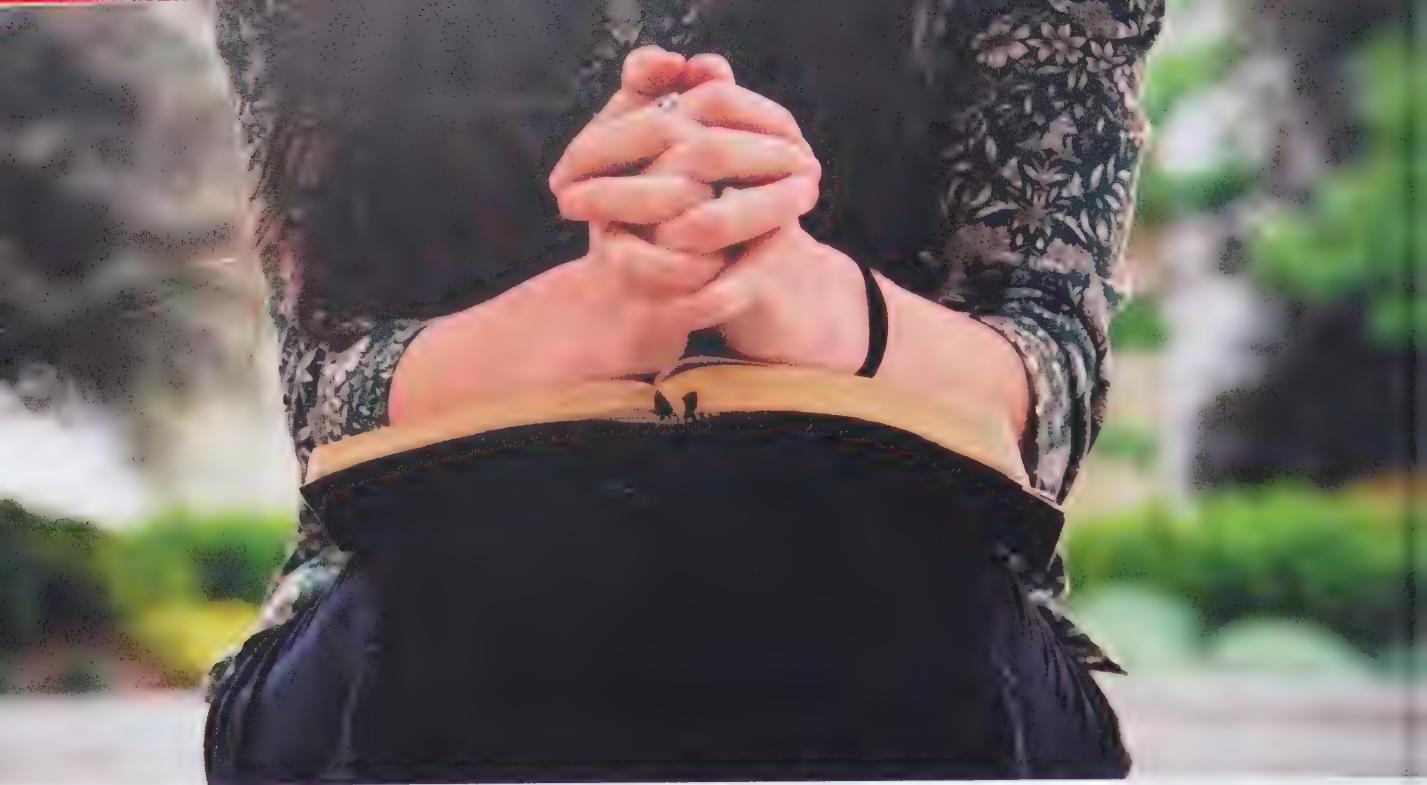
way we actually live (*That They May Be One*, 72).

This involves more than occasional common events; it means sharing together in a way of life grounded in Christ. For many of us, the community at Taizé in France is the best expression of this incarnational ecumenism of life. In this kind of ecumenical context, a great deal of ecumenical formation is required in order to live together peacefully and fruitfully. The conversations that arise typically focus on expressions of common life, spiritual growth, common mission, and our witness to the world around us. They occur mostly in informal contexts of daily life together.

The five avenues help us identify the locations and environments where various kinds of ecumenical conversations occur. Though the five avenues cover the formal situations where ecumenical conversations typically happen, there remains another context in which many ecumenical interactions actually take place: the informal, unplanned daily interactions in real life. For many of us, encounters with Christians from other traditions happen most frequently when we are not looking for it: and we want to be ready and equipped to engage those conversations well, in a way that furthers Christian unity and advances the glory of God. How, then, can we prepare ourselves so that our conversations with other Christians end up being fruitful?

## FRUITFULNESS IN ECUMENICAL CONVERSATIONS

So much could be said about what goes into making an ecumenical conversation fruitful. Much of this includes what makes any conversation, of whatever kind, fruitful. But I would like to identify qualities that pertain especially to this ‘genus’ of conversation that concerns interactions with other Christians. To repeat and specify the question: What goes into making an ecumenical conversation fruitful for the kingdom of God?



The most important qualities have to do with the character and formation of those engaging in this conversation. The first and foundational quality can be described by the following question: As a Catholic, do I know my faith well and am I happily living a Catholic way of life, seeking to integrate what I believe and how I live? It was Pope Emeritus Benedict who constantly underlined the core task of ecumenism as each party living more deeply a life in Christ. As we grow more deeply in holiness, so we grow (necessarily) closer to one another. Interactions with other Christians require us to explain our faith, and so we are 'tested' in what we know, and we grow in our ability to explain what we believe in terms that others can understand.

A second quality concerns our attitude toward other Christians. Does hostility or fear characterize our attitude? Do we come with an attitude of arrogance seeking to discredit other churches and their beliefs? Or at the other extreme, do we come with a cringing insecurity that only apologizes for being a Catholic? I recommend to my students that they adopt a posture of 'humble confidence' when engaging with other Christians.

Why 'confidence?' Not because we are supremely confident in ourselves but because as Catholics we believe that Jesus has truly founded a Church that He will sustain by His grace. We are confident that Christ has endowed the Catholic Church with the fullness of the means of grace and we see this through the many saints who have welcomed and lived this faith across the centuries.

Why 'humble?' Because we also recognize that the members of the Church, including ourselves, fall (far) short of all that we are called to be, and that oftentimes other Christians demonstrate a greater godliness and Christlikeness than we do! This is cause for a deep humility, and it enables us to approach others with appreciation for what Christ has done in them, even as we witness to what Christ has done in us. If we know our faith well, if we are seeking to live what we know, and if we approach our conversations as Catholics with a humble confidence, our ecumenical conversations have a good chance of being fruitful and providing a blessing for many.

It is also important to recognize how much our ecumenical interactions and conversations are

dependent on the specific context in which we find ourselves. Yes, we have many good principles for the task of ecumenism—and these principles are wonderfully expressed in the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism and in Pope Saint John Paul's Encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*. But the practice of ecumenism - how we implement these principles - is strongly dependent on context. Let me offer two examples to illustrate the importance of context.

If I am in conversation with people from the Eastern Orthodox Church, my interaction with them is very much dependent on what they believe, what issues are important to them, what they feel they can do together with Catholics, and what we have in common. I can (probably) assume that they have a deep appreciation for the Church Fathers; I know that they believe in Christ's real presence in the Eucharist; I can assume that they revere the Virgin Mary and gladly pray to the saints. But I also know that they don't agree with the Catholic Church about the role of the Pope and that they often carry a strong suspicion of Catholics trying to 'westernize' them. Many Orthodox today are wary of joining in common prayer with Catholics or Protestants and they often take up a defensive posture against the dominant Western churches that surround them. All these things are a matter of this specific context, and if I am to interact with my Orthodox brothers and sisters fruitfully, it is crucial to adjust myself to this specific context for interaction and conversation.

If on the other hand I am in conversation with evangelical Baptists from the south, I recognize a different set of contextual realities. I can be confident that they have a deep love and regard for the Scriptures—and usually know the Scriptures very well; I know that they will be concerned with mission and bringing people to encounter the person of Jesus Christ. But I also know that many of them wonder whether Catholics are really Christians at all; they often assume that Catholics don't know the Scriptures (alas, in this they are often correct) and

that Catholics believe they are justified by what they do and so earn their way into heaven. My task is to meet my fellow believers 'where they are,' to clarify what we as Catholics believe, and seek to advance the cause of unity in whatever way I can. In addition, my goal is to show my Evangelical brothers and sisters that we have a common mission together; though we cannot do liturgical prayer in common, we can witness together to our common faith in Jesus. Pope Francis has given powerful expression to just this kind of unity in his many interactions with Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians.

### ENGAGING IN ECUMENICAL CONVERSATIONS

It is impossible to 'script' an ecumenical conversation. Each one will have its own unique quality, and we do best when we engage in them with an adventurous spirit, trusting in the Spirit of God to help us at every stage. Still, I think it may be helpful to describe ways that I have found helpful to engage in these conversations, so that they can be fruitful for the kingdom of God.

The first ground rule for me is that I engage fellow Christians as believers in Jesus Christ with whom I share a real, but imperfect communion. This is the posture that the Church exhorts us to adopt. To underline this point: other baptized Christians are already part of my 'family' even if that family membership isn't full or complete. I begin by relating to them as 'family' and this opens up the conversations in ways that cannot happen when I approach them as strangers and outsiders. This is not to minimize or deny real differences but to start with our common ground and move ahead from there. If we start with debating points—with what divides us—we are unlikely to get very far or make progress. In the Catholic-Evangelical Dialogue, we have learned by experience to begin with what we could say together—and then move on to identify what we do not yet share.

Let me expand on this. My first and immediate goal is not to persuade my discussion partner to adopt Catholic teaching on a given point, but to meet them in Christ, to engage them as fellow disciples, and to establish a common ground of faith. This follows from the reality of our common bond in Christ. We begin with what we have in common so that we can explore (and even debate) what we do not share. One aspect of this engagement is to show them—in a way that they can grasp—that I am a genuine Christian who believes in Christ and seeks to follow him as a disciple. The language I use to describe this will depend on the context, but it is important that my fellow believers receive from me a witness to my own faith. This in fact gives them confidence to do the same and puts the conversation on solid ground. Pope Francis had made this his primary means of ecumenical interaction. He expresses his faith—and the common faith he shares—with other Christians, and in the process he enables other Christians to recognize his lively and personal faith, and to engage with him and to welcome interaction with the Catholic Church.

Second, I try to adopt a posture of charity toward other Christians, wishing to know them well and to value what they cherish and believe. This entails that I take up a posture of listening, of asking questions to get to know them and what they believe. What is their experience of the faith? What are their concerns and issues? Though I may enter a conversation with certain expectations, I always leave room for the individual people to present and describe themselves and their convictions. To put this in other words, my aim is to engage them as they are and to encounter them as fellow Christians who deserve my respect.

From here, conversations will go in any number of directions. What are they interested in pursuing? Do they want to talk about or discuss matters of faith? Do they want to hear an account of my own testimony about how I came to be an adult disciple? Are they most interested in current events and how the life of faith impacts our engagement

with the world? In all this, I seek to be a servant in these conversations. I try to resist the temptation to show-off my knowledge (not always successfully). I am not there to please myself or ‘win’ a debate. The question I ask is: how can I serve Christ in this conversation? How can I increase the unity we share through this interaction? How can I clarify what Catholics actually believe—and clear away misrepresentations—so that they are engaging with the actual content of our belief? How can I help this person know Christ more fully and share about what I have experienced as a Catholic? How can I break down barriers and open doors between our two communities?

## CONCLUSION: THE GOAL AND THE STEPS TO REACH THE GOAL

Pope Saint John Paul offers a helpful summary definition of ecumenism: “Ecumenism is directed precisely to making the partial communion existing between Christians grow towards full communion in truth and charity.” (Ut Unum Sint, 14) Our aim must align with Christ’s prayer, “that they may all be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (Jn 17:21) Acknowledging this ultimate goal of full unity in one Church, Pope Emeritus Benedict acknowledges that this full and complete unity is not going to be reached in our own times. And so he maintains that we need “realistic intermediate goals” that enable us to make progress on the road to that final goal. He identifies the various avenues to unity we have already named as the intermediate steps we can take now that increase the unity we share and unleash the power of our common witness to the world around us (“Luther and the Unity of the Churches,” Communio, 11, 1984, 225).

Whether planned or spontaneous, our ecumenical conversations—the conversations we have with other Christians—are occasions of grace where we can make our own small contribution - in charity and truth - to deepen the unity we share as Christians, to advance the Kingdom of God and to manifest the glory of God.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Dr. Keating has come to appreciate the blessings and possibilities of ecumenism from his own life experience. What have been your experiences of inter-action with Christians of other backgrounds? Thank God for the specific friends and relatives who witness their faith to you over the years.
2. Do I think of Christians from backgrounds different than my own as being members of the one same family of faith? Am I able to follow Dr. Keating's advice and approach every ecumenical encounter with "humble confidence?" Do I believe that to grow in holiness I must also be all the more concerned about the gifts and blessings of all my fellow Christians?
3. Reflect on a recent conversation you have had with a person of another faith tradition (or none at all): how did you connect with them? Did you learn or grow from the encounter?



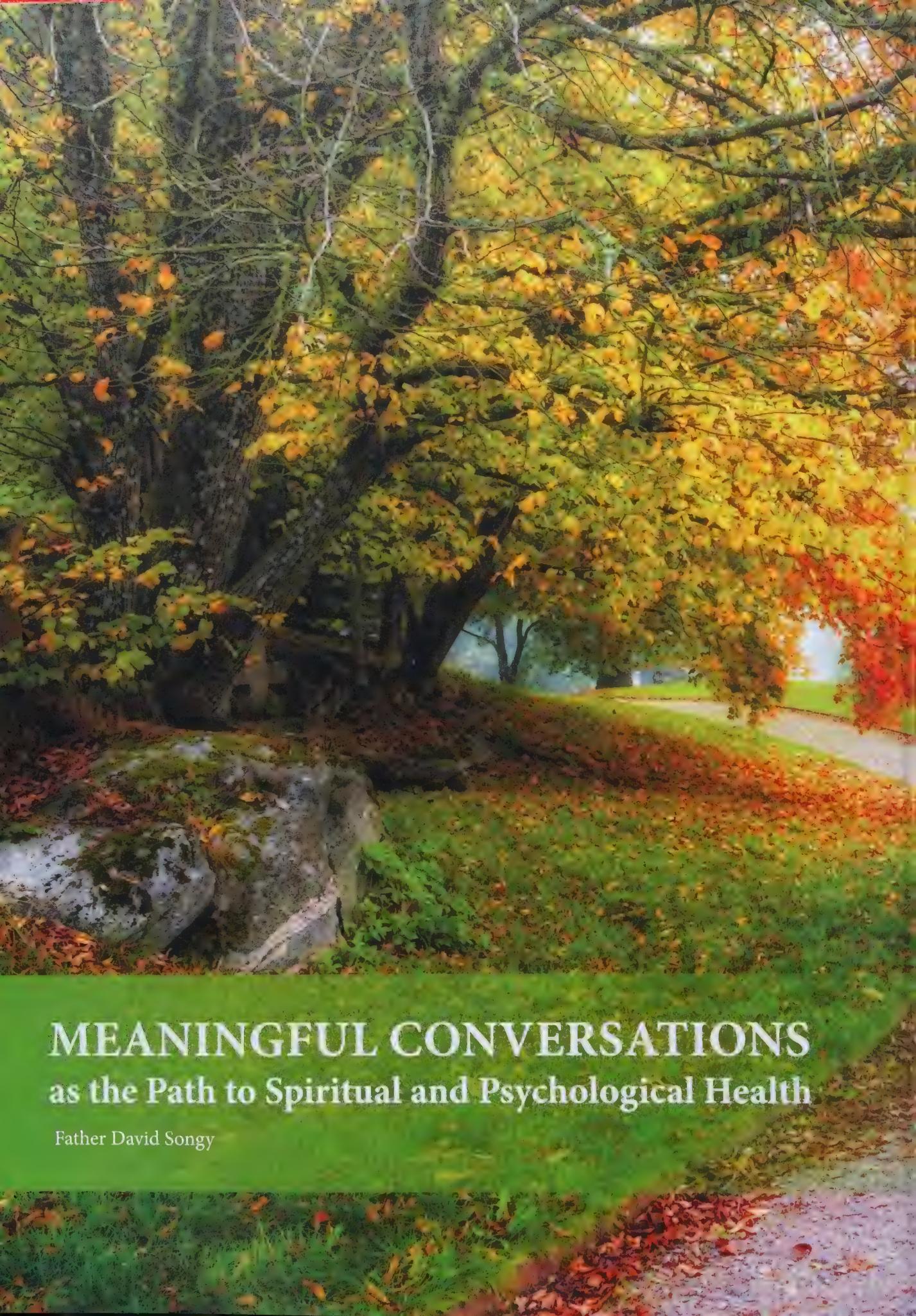
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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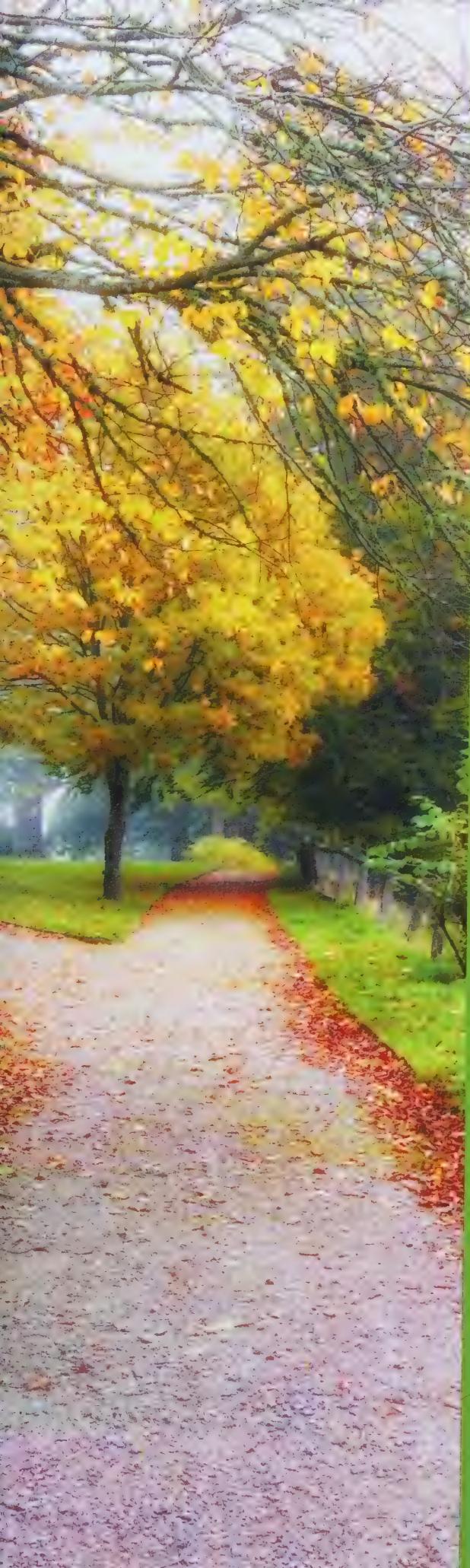
Dr. Keating lives in Lansing, Michigan, where he is a member of the Servants of the Word, a lay brotherhood dedicated to the work of evangelization and Christian unity.



# MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

as the Path to Spiritual and Psychological Health

Father David Songy



When religious superiors and vicars for clergy have people struggling with mental health issues, there often exists among them an impression that one best way exists to address what ails these individuals. Some will say the troubled person needs psychological help, and that alone will provide the remedy. Others counter that since all such problems have a spiritual root, a spiritual remedy is needed. Rarely do we encounter the notion that what the person needs is wise and patient accompaniment in the form of Catholic psychology, which utilizes both approaches.

"Catholic psychology?" some will ask. Isn't that a contradiction in terms? No, far from it. For while psychology and spirituality certainly are distinct, they are not at all contradictory. Indeed the melding of the two—a meaningful conversation, if you will—can be done, as I will show. More importantly if employed together, they can provide the most effective, long-lasting healing for the struggling individual, often much more than either can on its own.

I did not necessarily fully comprehend this when I began my counseling career, which I didn't begin until after my ordination. People are surprised to learn this and are curious to know why I became a psychologist after pursuing my vocation to the priesthood. The simple truth is when my superiors asked me to serve as the formator for young Capuchin vocations, I realized the need to learn skills for human formation. Understanding the process of human development, how to engage another person in an interview setting, how to recognize signs that point to emotional distress or deeper wounds, and how to help a person mature in a vocation all seemed essential. And psychology taught me these.

Over time, I began to utilize these same skills in helping others in crisis, especially priests, religious, seminarians, and lay Catholics who sought psychological counseling from someone who was particularly sensitive to their spiritual identity. At first I simply enjoyed being helpful. It is wonderful to watch a person in crisis relax and to observe firsthand the process of growth.

However over time I began to consider more carefully the fact that not everyone could be helped in the same way. Education in psychology included many components, and I was confronted by the question asked in my graduate course in Outcomes Assessment, "Is the therapy effective or not?" Another concern in light of my faith experience was, "What would be the ideal outcome for someone in need of healing?"

When people approach counseling, first and foremost they desire to be heard. If confident that someone does hear them, then they will eventually grow in self-knowledge and acceptance. This in turn can lead the person to various levels of healing: feeling understood, a decrease in pain, a capacity to work on issues outside of the counseling room, and increased integrity and meaning.

I believe a final stage of healing is related to the

fulfillment of a vocation, which is directly related to personal holiness. Most people think of a vocation as choosing to marry, receiving Holy Orders, professing religious vows, or embracing the single life. Vocation can also refer to a career path. However, the Christian vocation flows out of baptismal grace that seeks to bear fruit. Christ phrased this beautifully in John 15:9, when He said, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you."

Grace begets grace. Marriage is not simply an agreement between two people but a covenant of love. Similarly ordination is a sacrament that leads to the birth of spiritual children. Religious life and the consecrated single life are signs of a specific intervention of the Holy Spirit. Since integral healing touches body, mind and soul, it is essential to consider that each person has a vocational identity that requires spiritual healing in addition to psychological and physical care. Such healing involves leading a person anew on the specific path of holiness particular to each vocation.

A good example of someone in need of integral healing is "Sarah" (a fictitious name for a person who represents a mixture of actual clients with similar histories). She came to me for problems with scrupulosity. She sought a priest psychologist because she was "sure no other psychologist would understand [her]." Candidly this line made me cringe, because it showed/demonstrated for me how careful I would need to be to maintain her trust and hinted at what would need to happen over time, which I will subsequently demonstrate.

Sarah described her struggle of going into the church for daily Mass, genuflecting, and not being able to rise until her heart was "one with the Blessed Sacrament." This could be five seconds or five minutes. On occasion the celebrant actually needed to walk around her as he processed in. She offered several similar examples of getting stuck in a moment of adoration. Her description was not



an account of ecstasy rooted in grace. Rather her thoughts were quite fixed on avoiding evil. They had an obsessive quality.

In any event, empathically attending, listening for interchangeable responses (i.e., assurances that she felt heard), and allowing Sarah to speak at length about her struggles was essential for me to establish a solid therapeutic alliance and gain her trust.

Toward the end of our first session, I asked her about previous attempts to treat her scrupulosity. She replied her most recent confessor had sent her to me for he “thought [she] had a psychological problem.” Sarah felt both frustrated at his lack of understanding but a need to be “obedient” at the same time. This was an important moment for me to affirm both her desire for healing and her need to be faithful to religious authority. I assured her of my intention to keep her psychological and spiritual health in mind at the same time.

Over our next few sessions we worked on understanding the nature of her anxiety and

observing that her obsessions made her feel more anxious, and her compulsions helped her to relax. At the same time, the cycle of feel anxious, relaxing, and feeling anxious again contributed to an overall state of high anxiety. Her thoughts of unworthiness, fear, and guilt were quite prominent, even though Sarah was not engaging in any behaviors that would normally induce remorse.

I don’t mind sharing with you, the conversations were challenging. Nonetheless they became meaningful because through them I learned how to reach her. For instance, whenever I tried to speak about her experience of “unworthiness,” she would push back. Even though I tried to go gently, the words, “I don’t think you understand” signaled that I should give her more time and prompted a reminder of our initial conversation, that “no other psychologist would understand me.” Over time, though, Sarah was able to genuflect for only a few seconds, and she reported feeling more at peace. Nonetheless major work lay ahead.



For while psychologists correctly refer to scrupulosity as a religious form of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), the spiritual component of scrupulosity involves more than just a cycle of ever-increasing anxiety through obsessive thoughts and reducing anxiety through compulsive behaviors. The thoughts themselves do not reflect profound religious content.

I remember my initial surprise at realizing scrupulous people often do not have deep faith. Their seemingly pious behaviors actually distance them from God and other people. In addition they rarely commit serious sins, even though they are convinced they do. (This is not unlike the person convinced they are dying from germs, which, in fact, are not present.) Certainly from a spiritual perspective, avoiding serious sin is advantageous, but the scrupulous person's method produces only partial results. The true source of healing grace is to be found in God through the Church. To help Sarah experience this larger healing, I needed to encourage her to be open to this grace and consider the possibility of greater spiritual maturity, that is, to experience deeper intimacy with God, positively affecting her other significant relationships.

### DEEPER INTO A TRULY MEANINGFUL CONVERSATION

First, however, I needed to discover more about her experience of "unworthiness." From where did this come?

After some months of regular therapy, Sarah divulged her husband's infidelity when they were first dating. Friends recounted seeing him with another young woman at a party. She confronted him, and he admitted to both his transgression and its seriousness. While she told me she "forgave him," it was clear that a part of her still had not done so. While there were no signs of infidelity in the years before their marriage or the 30 years that followed, she still had no confidence she could fully trust him.

Sarah initially felt relieved at sharing this information with me but then experienced an upswing in obsessive and compulsive behaviors. I bided my time as these symptoms receded and eventually broached the subject again. "I was thinking about that session in which you were able to share with me the experience of forgiving your husband for his infidelity," I offered. As she listened to me, Sarah appeared tense. This time, though, she did not avert her eyes, so I continued. "I appreciate your willingness to be vulnerable in such moments," I told her, "and at the same time, I was concerned to see your scrupulous symptoms increase for a few weeks. It is good to see you doing better, and I wonder whether you had noticed this change?"

Sarah looked anxious but admitted, "I was embarrassed that I had shared this, even though I knew you would not judge me." For the first time she was indicating I "understood" without backing away from the conversation! I did not push further in the moment. Over time, however, we were able to explore this issue in greater depth.

The second movement toward spiritual healing involved conversations that helped Sarah perceive how God had helped her through this period of scrupulosity. She saw she had not become angry or spiteful. Her marriage was still intact, and her children loved their father. She realized God had been kind to her, providing comfort during her anxiety. We began to explore the possibility of being open to other graces. She had long sought healing through the grace of the Sacrament of Penance, and I suggested she reflect on the grace within the Sacrament of Matrimony, inviting her to speak about her own experience. Initially she was surprised by the fact that she had not looked closely at her vocation since before her wedding day.

After several educational sessions on the nature of human passions, as well as discernment of spirits to open a discussion on how God might be guiding her in both personal and spiritual ways, we began to look

more closely at her feelings for her husband. She spoke openly about her struggle over the years to be intimate, to fully give herself to her husband in the “free, faithful, total, and fruitful” way Pope St. John Paul II describes in his Theology of the Body. Sarah could admit her resentment of her husband’s one-time action had contributed to this distance between them. Over time she could discuss this relationship without becoming more scrupulous and was ready for the final stage of treatment.

Helping Sarah look more closely at her relationship with God was easier after having accompanied her on a long journey to consider her relationship with her husband, her own feelings of fear, and her thoughts of unworthiness. I have often found a consistency between a person’s struggle in a significant relationship (e.g., with a spouse or parent), and a lack of intimacy with God. This is because we tend to idealize such human relationships and are often hurt and can be deeply disappointed when others fall far below our expectations. We then transfer that disappointment onto God.

So it is understandable how, at first, contemplating intimacy with God made her feel uncomfortable. However I reminded her of her earlier desire to be “understood.” Despite occasional increases in anxiety, she could discuss her relationship with God and reflect on God’s support in her vocation to marriage. Eventually Sarah did not appear to be a poor soul caught up in her own web of scrupulosity. Rather she struck me as a woman of faith. Not all my clients could make this journey, but I am humbled at the memory of those who could.

### **MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS WITH MEN IN SEMINARY FORMATION**

While I feel privileged to have helped many scrupulous people in both psychological and spiritual healing, I worked primarily as a priest psychologist with seminarians whose problems were often of a different nature.

One issue in particular that, just like Sarah’s case, required a meaningful conversation between psychological and spiritual approaches was the challenge of celibate chastity. The approaches of each of these two fields can seem at first glance to be almost irreconcilable. For as a psychologist, I was trained to see problems in sexuality as involving a person feeling uncomfortable as a sexual person or in sexual performance, struggling with impulse control, or suffering from a sexual addiction.

Treating seminarians or priests in this area could involve individual and/or group psychotherapy, supplemented by 12 step programs for those with more serious issues. Professional psychology ethics, secular in nature, prohibited me from fully exploring issues of sexual identity and sexual orientation.

Development of the virtue of chastity requires reflection on one’s vocation. Human and spiritual formation in priestly celibacy includes sex education. Just as important, though, are developing integral human relationships, learning the spiritual theology of priestly celibacy, undergoing conscience formation, and embracing priestly virtue.

The following series of conversations describe my attempt to bridge these two fields.

“Joe” began his first visit with me to discuss his “addiction” to pornography, convinced he could not remain in the seminary because he could not get rid of this vice. As we explored his history of looking at pornography, I asked him a series of questions to determine frequency, length of time on the Internet, range of sites visited, whether he was visiting chat rooms or cameras, and whether he was paying for sites.

I have heard a wide range of responses from seminarians with addiction. However it was clear Joe did not have an addiction per se. Rather he needed to develop a more virtuous life, consistent with his vocation. Why? Joe was accessing pornography at the rate of five minutes a month and was primarily

viewing inappropriate photos of adult women. OK, it was a problem, but five minutes a month does not an addiction make. A look of relief spread across his face as he heard my assessment. I continued, “This seems to be largely a moral and spiritual problem, rooted in a lack of virtue.” We then began to discuss how to help him. Would he continue to work with me as a psychologist, or should he focus this work within spiritual direction?

This was a small dilemma. For if Joe had an addiction to pornography, I possessed a variety of psychological tools to aid him. But he didn’t. At the same time, he clearly had not found sufficient help from his current spiritual director. I suggested we address chastity in the context of counseling, keeping his spiritual and vocational goals in the forefront. Joe’s primary interest lay in stopping the undesired behavior. To that end we spent some time discussing decisions he could make to avoid temptation, ways of reducing stress, and generally healthy lifestyle changes. He had already had such remedies offered to him in the confessional, though, and he had already tried them. They hadn’t worked.

After praying about and pondering the challenge before us, I then suggested he reflect on the nature of his vocation. Over several weeks he spoke about his initial call to the priesthood and his experiences in seminary formation. As we began to speak about his understanding of celibate chastity, he shared his belief that, “Priests are called to be celibate, because Christ was celibate, and they need to be pure like Him.” While certainly this is true, it does not present the whole reason for priestly celibacy. Joe was focusing more on sexual continence and not on the priestly vocation to love. Therefore, at my invitation, Joe read a couple of documents on the nature of priestly celibacy, exploring a richer spiritual theology and discussing this with me. He was ready for my next intervention.

Aware that celibacy was linked to the priest’s call to love others, he could now speak about his

brief, monthly encounters with pornography as inconsistent with a vocation to love. “Why would God not have healed you yet, Joe?” I asked him. He said, “I needed to see how I do not love women as Jesus does.” He understood. His was not primarily an issue of purity but of not knowing how to love. Eventually Joe experienced a greater ability to be chaste and was able to explore several other aspects of formation in celibate chastity.

## DEVELOPING A CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

Joe’s success notwithstanding, applying my skills as a psychologist to a priestly formation setting has been particularly challenging, since human and spiritual dynamics require constant integration. In addition, the tension between human and spiritual formation personnel can be especially intimidating. A seminary rector oversees all formation: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. Nonetheless because he acts in the public arena (external forum)—evaluating a seminarian’s suitability for holy orders and making recommendations, etc.—seminarians often primarily view him as an authority figure. The spiritual director, on the other hand, acts in the private arena (internal forum). The seminarian often feels freer to speak in this person’s company, knowing the spiritual director does not participate in the evaluation process. My role was somewhere in-between these two figures. At times I was a member of an external forum team and at other times was a spiritual director. When I acted as a priest psychologist, however, I was neither the person deciding a seminarian’s future nor a spiritual director focusing primarily on the individual’s spiritual life.

Eventually I assumed the conversational style of a spiritual foster father in the tradition of St. Joseph, using a synthetic combination of psychological, philosophical, and theological wisdom. Jesus’ earthly father shared both practical skills and intimate knowledge of God with his Son. Nonetheless he never made the mistake of presuming he was Jesus’ true Father.

When I first put up my counseling shingle, I believed I could help almost anyone. I soon realized my knowledge and experience were quite minimal. In time I learned to say, “No, I would not be the best person to help you.” This would produce a variety of reactions, often an insistence that I was wrong! In time, however people usually appreciated my referring them to a person with greater clinical skills. In a similar way, my priesthood has been a gift of healing others that has matured over time. But like my experience as a psychologist, after my ordination, I believed I could provide spiritual help to almost anyone. The lesson of spiritual humility took a bit longer than the one in psychological modesty.

Being able to point to the Father and not to myself has become a most fruitful tool. I have developed a style of conversation that communicates a paternal (not paternalistic) care that is attentive to the psychological and spiritual needs of the many who still ask for help. In addition to exploring a variety of symptoms and discussing a person’s history, I always ask about their experience of God, especially when considering the problems that bring them to me.

### **CONDUCTING MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS IN A MULTI-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT**

The sorts of steps I’ve outlined above come from my experiences here in the United States with an American audience. But while they feature aspects one can make applicable anywhere in the world, circumstances and cultural factors will dictate a different approach with immigrants and outside this nation’s borders.

For instance, as a newly ordained priest in 1987, my superiors sent me to serve as a missionary in Papua New Guinea. This period coincided with my initial venture into the field of psychology, and I was eager to apply my education in psychological evaluations and vocational assessments as a priest psychologist in multi-cultural settings. I soon learned, though, that most of the available assessment tools were

developed specifically for use in the United States. Utilizing them in other countries required prudence and adaptation. Based on these experiences my doctoral research explored the usefulness in Papua New Guinea of several objective instruments originally designed for American and Asian seminarians. In turn, this exploration allowed me to determine statistical norms for Papua New Guinea.

This cross cultural assessment remains more of an art than a science, however. Instruments translated into Spanish, for example, often contain cultural bias by not correctly translating idioms or using examples from American society that have different connotations. I have found translations for the MMPI-2 in Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, and Polish, but determining where bias lies in each version is beyond my expertise.

As most readers know, many seminary candidates who come to the United States—and thus need to undergo evaluations—speak other languages. I have learned it is essential to wait at least six months before undertaking an evaluation that will produce valid results, even if I can speak that candidate’s language and have test translations available. To test too early will often result in invalid data, and to provide a candidate assessment based on poor data would obviously go against professional and ethical principles.

### **CONCLUSION**

I remember the Consistory when Cardinal John Patrick Foley was elevated to the cardinalate and a question by the media: “Isn’t this the greatest moment in your life?” His frank response: “Nothing will top the day of my priestly ordination.” My thoughts are similar. Psychology is a great tool. Counseling skills enhance my ability to help others. But at the base of everything I do is my vocation. As a Capuchin priest I embrace a charism of penance and evangelization that guides my ministry to others, inspiring me to embrace the poor and announce the

presence of God. Each meaningful conversation I have described was also a story of my own vocation: called to love others to the point that they experience healing that could only be brought about by God.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. As a priest, Capuchin Franciscan, spiritual director and therapist, Father Songy has enjoyed many privileged moments of “meaningful conversations.” Moving gracefully from one “skill set” to another, he has come to the conclusion that genuine or integral healing comes only when a person is in touch with their unique God-given “life vocation.” Have you found that to be true in your own life experience and in your ministerial/family relationships?
2. Fr. Songy notes that there is a direct connection between a person’s capacity for healthy human relationships and a relationship of intimacy with God. Do you agree? Might a current human relationship in your life be affecting your ability to enter into a more confident, peaceful bond with God? Conversely, does spending contemplative time with God help make your conversations with significant family members and friends more profound?
3. In each of his case studies, Fr. Songy noted that therapy alone is never the complete answer; faith, prayer and community are necessary supports. What aspects of my life have I not yet brought to the light of the Lord for the healing He alone can offer? Do I also seek support from others?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Father David Songy is a priest of the Capuchin Province of Mid-America and a clinical psychologist. Prior to coming to Saint Luke Institute, he was the spiritual director and prefect of studies at Redemptoris Mater Missionary Seminary in Denver, Colorado. He also was director of counseling services at the Pontifical North American College in Rome and held several positions at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary. Fr. Songy holds a doctorate in psychology from the University of Denver and a doctorate in sacred theology from the Teresianum, the Pontifical Institute of Spirituality in Rome. He holds a master’s degree in pastoral counseling from Loyola College and theology degrees from Aquinas Institute. Fr. Songy speaks Italian, Spanish and Tok Pisin, the language of Papua New Guinea and gives workshops on topics such as priestly spirituality, formation in priestly celibacy, cybersex addiction and the integration of psychological and spiritual treatment.



# MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS IN CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Stephen T. Krupa, S.J.



## INTRODUCTION: PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND ALL THAT IS

I just passed the mark last year of 40 years as a Jesuit. In that time I have done a fair amount of spiritual direction, have trained spiritual directors, and have taught full time and preached at two Jesuit universities. Such have been some of the gifts and privileges of ministry for me through the Society of Jesus.

Since one of the central themes of Ignatian spirituality is that God deals directly with persons, I have been amazed throughout these four decades at the consistent expressions of 'surprise' from persons, many of whom are cradle Christians of one denomination or another, who have told me that they never thought that they ever would or could have a direct relationship with God. It was never their expectation, they tell me, that religion, even the Catholic religion, would or could be primarily about a personal relationship with God.



A set of ethical norms from which to live and make decisions, yes. Sacramental and liturgical rites for their children, for them, and for their aging parents in times of birth, marriage, and death, sure. A place to come and petition God for individual and social needs. Absolutely. But intimacy with God in a person-to-person relationship? No! Really? Who'd have thought it possible? And, so, my directees are delighted, some amazed, to "meet" God, to have God come close in prayer and in life.

Whatever else it is, contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition is about God coming close, about God as real and me being real back, about God as experienced. In discursive meditation, I can have tremendous and important thoughts 'about' God. Some of those thoughts might even move into my

heart, and as they do, the ground is being prepared for the gift of contemplation. With contemplative prayer, I not only know 'about' God, but I come to 'know' God in the biblical sense of knowing a friend or a lover. And, as Catholic theologian Karl Rahner points out, I cannot come to this kind of direct knowledge of God without at the same time coming to know myself, my essential or 'true self' as the subject of God's love.

What is true for me is true for others, as well. All people and all creatures are the subjects of God's love. This plain truth surfaces in contemplation. The experience of a "long loving look at the real" that is contemplation (Carmelite William McNamara's definition) brings with it the awareness that I really am connected to all that is. If contemplation is

the “gaze of faith” fixed on God (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2000, #2715), then it is fixed on ‘Being Itself,’ the source of all being. As such, contemplative prayer cannot be a private preserve or an escape from “the real.” It is profoundly personal and intrinsically social. In contemplative prayer I experience not only a person-to-person relationship with God, who is our common Source and Destiny, but, crucial for our time, such prayer uncovers our connection to life in all of its forms, a solidarity that is there all the time, if only we were not too distracted to see it.

## PART 1: THE RELIGIOUS MEANING OF CONTEMPLATION: TYPES OF MEANINGFUL CONTEMPLATIVE CONVERSATION

[Ed note: to assist you, the reader, please note that Fr. Krupa has divided his article into two sections. Part one is a theological presentation on contemplative prayer while Part two is a practical or pastoral application with a “case study.”]

At the start of an essay on the topic of contemplation as ‘meaningful conversation,’ it should be noted that contemplation is its own unique kind of conversation in the Christian prayer tradition and, secondly, that it may be experienced as no conversation at all.

Both in and outside of Christianity the word contemplation has had multiple meanings. In general, the word stands for thoughtful rumination, a focused and often tranquil consideration or savoring of something. In this article, I am concerned with the religious meanings of contemplation, and specifically with Christian and Roman Catholic Christian meanings. While contemplation is standard practice in other faith traditions, the legacy of contemplative prayer in Christianity is ancient. The idea common among spiritual seekers in the last half of the 20th century that one had to “go East” to experience meditation and contemplation was mistaken. The roots of contemplative prayer in the

Judeo-Christian tradition run deep.

The Bible in both Testaments gives witness to contemplative prayer in the lives of spiritual figures who spent time contemplating God, like Moses (Ex. 3:1-15), Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:9-13a), Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-8), Job (38-42:6), and the Psalm authors (Pss. 8:1-9; 84:1-4). Paul reports contemplating “ineffable things” for which there are no words (2 Cor. 12:1-4), while Mary ‘considered’ God’s invitation (Lk. 1:29, 34) and ‘pondered in her heart’ the things said about her son (Lk. 2:19, 51). Like Moses and Elijah before him, Jesus apparently spent long periods of time in solitude and communion with God (Mk. 1:35, 6:46, 14:32; Mt. 14:23; Lk. 5:16, 6:12, 9:18).

In terms of its religious meaning, therefore, what is contemplation?

In addition to the definitions above (McNamara, Catechism), I offer a simple working definition of contemplation and contemplative prayer, generally, as the still awareness of the direct and transforming presence of God. For Christians, God is the Triune God known to the believer in and through Jesus Christ and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the world and in the life of the Church. This is the still awareness of God that is addressed to us in scripture through the Psalmist, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

The term contemplation has had different meanings in Christian history, being restricted throughout much of that history to infused contemplation (i.e., acute and habitual passivity and union with the Divine in prayer that is entirely God’s work; see below). I believe, however, that the working definition above can be applied to contemplative prayer, more broadly, and to the major classic forms of contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition: meditation, imaginative contemplation, and infused contemplation.

For much of Christian history, contemplative prayer, and especially infused contemplation,

**"When meditation enters the heart, prayer simplifies, becomes more still, even silent, and, thus, can bring the pray-er to the threshold of contemplation."**

was thought to be the domain only of cloistered religious women and monks. The emphasis in the Catholic Church since Vatican II on the 'universal call to holiness' (Lumen Gentium, Ch. 5), and the Council's encouragement to all Catholics to make the Bible their own (Dei Verbum, Ch. 6), has resulted in masses of Catholics and other Christians making retreats, creating lectio divina prayer groups, and submerging themselves in the rich tradition of Roman Catholic prayer and mysticism. Meditation, imaginative contemplation, and infused contemplation belong to all the baptized.

## MEDITATION

While in recent years a number of scientific studies have reported on the positive health outcomes of meditation and contemplation, for the religious or spiritual seeker, meditation, like contemplation, is a classic spiritual practice in the Church that is intended to bring one close to God.

There are different types of meditation in the Christian tradition. Discursive meditation makes use of the powers of the intellect and rational reflection for the purpose of personally appropriating faith in Jesus Christ. By means of thoughtful reflection on scripture, Jesus in the Gospels, a Person of the Trinity or a biblical figure, a truth of faith, personal experience, a work of art, nature's wonder, a current event or human need, the Christian pray-er is drawn to a deeper commitment to follow Christ in the world. In discursive meditation, the rational intellect moves more-or-less logically and progressively to reach the kind of knowledge of

God, self, and the world that leads to a personal commitment to Christian truth and virtue, and to discerned choices. Such "mental prayer" assists the discernment of spirits and mature Christian decision-making. Discursive meditation was the dominant form of meditation in the Christian West from roughly the 14th c. to Vatican II.

That discursive meditation represents for many Christians the sum-total of meditative prayer in the Christian tradition indicates an error in understanding the history of this classic prayer form. Actually, meditation in roughly the first twelve centuries of Christianity was a matter of the heart, not the head.

Early monastic meditation, as understood and practiced by desert ascetics and monks, like St. Anthony of the Desert (d. 356), Cassian (d. 435), and Benedict of Nursia (d. 547), relied on primitive means, namely, the memorization and repetition of scripture passages, since so few printed copies of the Bible were available until the 15th c. invention of movable type. This primitive form of Christian meditation is based on a particular use of lectio divina (i.e., a 'sacred reading' of religious texts that is slow and deliberative). As a scripture passage was read aloud and in common (lectio), the monk would select a single scripture verse, or a single word or phrase, memorize it, and repeat the text orally. Then, throughout the day, while doing manual labor or in silent meditation, he would ruminate or 'chew' on the text until it moved into the heart (see Cassian, *Conferences*, 10). This 'inverbation' of the scriptural Word of God (i.e., 'taking-in' the Word) through

meditative repetition made the Word ‘flesh’ again in the life of the monk. Letting the Word of God find a home in one’s heart made the text very personal and intimate.

Thomas Merton, who was critical of the view of meditation as just mental or discursive prayer, called this move in meditation from the intellect to the center of the whole person the ‘prayer of the heart’ (“Prayer, Personalism, and the Spirit,” 1970). When meditation enters the heart, prayer simplifies, becomes more still, even silent, and, thus, can bring the pray-er to the threshold of contemplation.

### IMAGINATIVE CONTEMPLATION

Teresa of Avila (d. 1582) and John of the Cross (d. 1591), used the term contemplation in the strict sense of infused contemplation. However, their 16th c. Spanish contemporary, Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556), used “contemplation” most often to refer to imaginative contemplation, even though he himself experienced infused contemplation. In The Spiritual Exercises, 33 Ignatius instructs the one making them (the ‘exercitant’) to use the imagination to contemplate sacred scriptures. Ignatius knew that discursive meditation, while helpful for growing in knowledge of God, can remain at the level of the intellect with scant connection to the heart and human affectivity. By contrast, the imagination is concrete and specific and can render the very same biblical material used for discursive meditation tangible, distinct, and deeply personal (see Kate’s different use of Luke 5:1-11 below).

Ignatius’ bias in favor of ‘tasting and savoring’ the mysteries of the Christian faith (i.e., “felt knowledge”) is evident at the beginning of The Spiritual Exercises in his instruction to the director to be brief in presenting to an exercitant the points for meditation: “For it is not the multiplicity of ideas that satisfies the soul, but the inner taste of things” (Exercises, #2). Ignatius himself was not a speculative thinker. As the Exercises make clear, he favored the concrete and particular in prayer, since

what is tangible can become personal and move the heart to generous self-donation (i.e., making an ‘Election’ to follow Jesus ever more completely in the world; Exercises, #169ff.). God is most clearly mediated to us, Ignatius believed, through images and stories that move the heart to ‘savor’ and ‘relish’ the personal experience of God (i.e., not just ‘thinking about’ God). The pictorial nature of many passages in both Testaments, particularly in the Gospels, provides rich material for the use of the imagination in prayer.

In encouraging the gifts of imagination and memory in prayer, Ignatius advises the pray-er to use the ‘application of the senses’, that is, to see, hear, smell, taste, and touch with the senses in imagination the events presented in the biblical narratives used for contemplation (Exercises, ##121-126). He instructs the person making the Exercises to ‘see the place,’ that is, to make a mental representation (a ‘composition’) of the place and location of the biblical event; to see in the imagination the time of day, the geography, and the specifics of the outdoor or indoor location; and in relationship to the persons in the narrative, to “look upon them, to contemplate them,” to “watch and notice and consider” what they are doing, saying, thinking, and feeling as they interact with Jesus and one another (Exercises, ##114-116). Further, Ignatius suggests that the person become actively part of the biblical scene as a bystander, or even by becoming one of the central characters in the narrative. This imaginative immersion into the written word of the Bible brings the persons and events from thousands of years ago into the present and puts the scene and its concerns into ‘meaningful conversation’ with a pray-er’s personal life and life in society (see Kate’s second use of Luke 5:1-11 below).

It is the person of Jesus that particularly attracts Christians. Imaginative contemplation of Gospel narratives creates a familiarity with Jesus and an ease in sharing one’s life with him. Christ’s values, Christ’s heart, Christ’s attitudes and practical approach to people, particularly those in need, start to shape

my own values, attitudes, and decisions. (“In union with Jesus, we seek what he seeks and we love what he loves,” Pope Francis I, *Evangelii Gaudium*, #267). Through imaginatively contemplating the life of Jesus the follower of Jesus gains “an intimate knowledge of our Lord, who has become incarnate for me, that I may love him more intensely and follow him more closely” (Ignatius, *Exercises*, #104). No small thing, this intimacy with Jesus. The words, values, ideas, outlook, facial expressions, emotions, and actions of Jesus are God’s words, emotions, and actions. Who knew that conversation with God could become so comfortable?

Imaginative contemplation, thus, is formative and transformative, influencing one’s most important choices and commitments. Knowing Jesus as a confidant and companion, now, how do I want to live my life? What does his story say to my own? How does society need to be shaped by the values of Jesus? How can I participate in ‘God’s project for humanity’ as revealed by the life and death of Jesus? These are questions for ongoing discernment and discerned decisions in my life. [Kate answers some of these questions for herself below]. This is the reason that Ignatius gives the instruction to the exercitant to end each imaginative contemplation with a brief ‘colloquy’, that is, “sharing personal concerns and asking for advice about them” (*Exercises* #54; cf. #199: to “talk things over and make petitions according to our present situation”). For Ignatius, a ‘colloquy’ is “speaking as one friend speaks with another” (*Exercises*, #54). Is there any better or more ‘meaningful conversation’ than the one between this great Friend and me?

### PRAYER OF SIMPLICITY AND INFUSED CONTEMPLATION

Habitual contemplative prayer tends to simplify. Even discursive meditation ‘slows down’ over time as pray-ers begin to savor a much-loved scene from the Gospel, a favorite verse from Hebrew scriptures that is remembered and repeated, or the specific

words of Jesus to Mary Magdalene or Nicodemus that now have touched their own life-experiences. Indeed, without planning it, some pray-ers move from discursive meditation (reasoned appropriation) to early monastic contemplation (Cassian and Merton’s ‘prayer of the heart’) on their own. A shift in prayer happens when intuition (i.e., immediate awareness) routinely supersedes reason, imagination and memory in prayer and, thus, replaces the busyness and detail of both discursive meditation and imaginative contemplation. The ‘conversation’ between the person and God clarifies, becoming more transparent and simple. A word, or no words, a glance, or an intuition of deep emotions of love, sorrow, tranquility, joy, humor, awe, or adoration now become the ‘meaningful conversation’ between God and the person.

Called variously the prayer of simplicity, the prayer of quiet, and the prayer of simple regard, this development in contemplative Christian prayer is marked by a still or tranquil abiding in God. Verbal prayer as well as discursive and imaginative contemplation are difficult, now, since the faculties of reason, imagination and memory have been eclipsed by a steady silence. There is a paradox here: the pray-er feels that more and more of the self is present and praying while there is less and less activity and effort.

If contemplative prayer is the still awareness of the direct and transforming presence of God, the person who routinely experiences God in ‘simplicity’ and ‘quiet’ is at the threshold of contemplation, understood strictly, now, as infused contemplation. A pray-er can do nothing to cause this particular form of grace, often described in the literature of Christian mysticism as the experience of ‘union with God’. Typically unannounced, infused contemplation comes as a direct and undeniable experience of God’s presence, a powerful and intense ‘loving knowledge’ that penetrates to the innermost depths of the person. This knowledge is obscure and the experience of it is ineffable; it is experienced as overwhelming and indescribable (cf. William James,



Varieties of Religious Experience, Lectures 16-17). It is unclear, at first, if something is expected or is being asked of the person until the person realizes that nothing is expected or is being asked by God except to be in the presence of Being.

If and when infused contemplation occurs, it is God's work. The person is present but passive and cannot foresee, cause, or prolong this experience of intimate encounter with God. God has taken over in the life of the pray-er, despite the person's sin and failure, doubt and fear, and past mediocre attempts to respond in life to God's love. Infused contemplation is the unmerited work of love. It is the full flourishing of the grace of God that for Christians was ushered in at the baptismal font.

Karl Rahner has argued strongly that since grace (i.e., God's self-communication) is constant in everyday life and addressed to all people, infused contemplation is not an 'extrinsic' divine intervention intended only for a select and deserving few (cf. "Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology," Theological Investigations, XVIII, 1981). It is a part of the ordinary life of grace available to all. If there are few 'mystics' among Christians (i.e., those who experience infused contemplation acutely and habitually), in Rahner's reckoning, it is not because God gives this gift to 'an elect' (a view that his thinking on grace debunks), but for 'natural' reasons. Persons might be trapped in sin, for example (i.e., sins committed, but also, importantly, sins 'done unto' a person, like abuse and neglect which can bring into the relationship with God a deficit in self-love). But beyond 'disordered attachments' (Exercises, #21) are the real possibilities that persons are either unavailable to God for real friendship ('I just don't have the time', 'I have other commitments') or have not learned and incorporated into their lives practices from the rich Christian tradition of contemplative prayer (as presented in this article).

Rahner believes that God offers no less than God's very self to everyone. God is a persistent and

jealous lover and will wait for the beloved. It is on the beloved not to delay or forestall God's action by refusing to be open to God, or unavailable, because distracted, to God's free and unpredictable approach in love (Song of Songs 2:8, 14).

Kate, a wife and mother of four, has taken the time in her life to be with God. Part of her spiritual journey is recounted below. It embodies the 'meaningful conversation' that is intrinsic to discursive, early monastic, imaginative, and infused contemplation.

## PART 2: PRACTICAL APPLICATION: THE CASE OF KATE

I will give the name Kate to a woman that I saw for two silent directed retreats and several spiritual direction sessions over a period of 15 years. She made her first-ever, six-day retreat with me as her director at a retreat center where she followed the regular silent retreat format of four to five sessions of scriptural meditation per day. Her reading on Day 3 of Luke 5:1-11 (Peter's first encounter with Jesus after a day spent fishing) was an important one and the text remained a rich biblical resource in her spirituality for many years. The conversations below are abridged for this article.

### Meaningful Conversation #1

Kate commented: "Well, what I got out of the Luke reading is the lesson that you don't get fish if you're not willing to 'put out' into the water each day, to put your back into it. The men in the boat put in a hard day's work. This is what I do as the mother of four kids (at the time between the ages of 9 and 15) and in my CCD teaching and volunteer work tutoring 'at risk' kids. The reading helped me feel that I am on the right path, that Jesus 'gets' me."

I suggested that Kate do 'a repetition' of Luke 5:1-11 on Day 4, but this time that she try a 'colloquy' with the reading, that is, have a conversation with Jesus about it 'as one friend might speak to another friend.' Kate came back the next day and reported the following.



"I 'talked' to Jesus about Luke 5 as you suggested, and just thanked him for 'getting' my life as a wife, mother, and volunteer. All I could say was, 'help me to keep feeding my family well. Help me when I second-guess my actions and words.' Jesus said he would! (she smiled)." I asked Kate what it felt like to hear Jesus respond. "Very affirming."

Before moving on, I asked Kate if anything else happened with Luke. "Yes," she said. "I got stopped at the words of Peter, 'Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.' It wasn't that I feel like a terrible sinner; actually, I felt Jesus close to me in that moment. I felt accepted as I am, loved. I hope Peter experienced that." I asked Kate what that felt like. "Pretty wonderful." I asked what happened next.

"I just stayed with that feeling for a while. Then, I remember thinking, 'I guess that Jesus thinks that I'm OK!'" (smile).

I ended the direction session with Kate on Day 4 suggesting that if she ever felt moved by a verse from scripture, or by a phrase or even a word, that she 'stay with it' the way she did with Peter's words in Luke.

Kate used discursive meditation overall in this 6-day retreat. Her reflection in prayer involved the mostly rational appropriation of biblical texts to her life, work, and relationships, including her relationship with God. Her meditations each day provided rich and meaningful 'lessons' for her living and supported her commitments and choices in life. In addition, she started for the first time, she said, to "talk to God" directly about her life and commitments. She thanked me for the instruction on the 'colloquy' that Ignatius suggests as a good way to end each biblical meditation. Finally, in one instance, on Day 4, Kate moved from the 'meaningful conversation' of discursive meditation to the kind of 'conversation' characteristic of early monastic contemplation, one based on a verse or phrase of scripture that uses fewer words, and that moves to an interior 'savoring' of God's self-communication (cf. Cassian, Merton above). "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" moved from Kate's head into her heart, a new place in prayer for Kate and God to meet.

### **Meaningful Conversation #2**

It was eight years later that Kate contacted me telling me that she and her husband were back in town with just one child, the youngest, at home. The other three children were in college and she was discerning her next step in life "now that I am not needed as much as a mother." She asked if I would direct her 8-day retreat in the summer.

On Day 4 of the retreat, Kate again took up Luke 5:1-11. She came to our spiritual direction session on Day 5 with this report.

“This reading was important in my first directed retreat, but I was in no way prepared for what happened last night. It came alive for me. My husband and I were sitting on the boat watching Jesus and the disciples trying to haul in this huge net bursting at the seams with fish. I could smell fresh water, feel the warm wind, and delighted in the sun and warmth of the afternoon. (I had encouraged Kate to use the ‘application of the senses’). My husband and I were sitting on a bench about 12 feet away from the edge of the deck where Jesus and the men were struggling to bring the net onboard. What was different this time is that Jesus was actually helping them to haul in the fish. I was sitting on the wooden bench, my back leaning against my husband’s chest. My husband was holding me and both of us were smiling, delighted to be witnessing this scene in front of us. Suddenly, Jesus, who was tugging hard on the net, turned and looked right at me over his left shoulder and said, ‘Get over here! I need you.’ He did not say this to my husband who stayed on the bench. I got up, went over, and took my place on Jesus’ left, and began to yank on the net along with his disciples. When we finally got the net over the rails a huge number of fish poured onto the deck. My husband ran over and laughed with delight, as did we all! Great experience!”

I said to Kate, “As you’ve reflected on this experience since last night, what strikes you about it?” “Well several things, that Jesus wanted me to be next to him in doing this work. Do you think that has anything to do with the transition that I am in now, with me looking for new work? Also, my utter delight! It was such a thrill to be close to Jesus and to ‘team’ with the disciples. When those fish came

over the side, how great was that! The curious thing in this scene is that Jesus did not ask Jim to man the net. He was not at all jealous of me being asked by Jesus, either. But that’s just like Jim.”

“As you have shared him with me, Jim seems like a great guy,” I commented. “Yeah,” Kate said (big smile). “How do you feel now?” I asked. (Pause). “Thrilled . . . empowered.” “Empowered,” I repeated. “Yeah. He wants me to do his work.”

Days 6-8 of Kate’s retreat were more of the same. That she was a disciple and personally empowered by Jesus to do his work was affirmed by several meditations and one more significant imaginative contemplation. Meditating on the “vine and the branches” text from Jn. 15:1-17, Kate’s heart settled into the phrases, “without me you can do nothing” and “I no longer call you servants but friends” (vv. 5, 15). Her way with John 15 was not discursive, but, rather, like early monastic meditation, Kate repeated these biblical verses like a mantra to make them her own (‘inverbation’). Imaginative contemplation on the text of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-20) strengthened Kate’s belief that Jesus was inviting her to do his work. “I was there at the Last Supper. I let him wash my feet. I was invited into the ‘circle of Jesus’ friends and heard him say to us, “Go, do likewise!” It moved me deeply. I am a ‘co-worker’, no less than the men. I want to continue to work with the needy,” Kate said.

Kate had added imaginative contemplation to her prayer palette from the time of our first retreat, and she had moved from discursive meditation to relishing phrases that she repeated from the scriptures that touched her heart (early monastic

**“I was there at the Last Supper. I let him wash my feet. I was invited into the ‘circle of Jesus’ friends and heard him say to us, “Go, do likewise!”**



contemplation). Her experience of Luke 5:1-11, markedly different from the first retreat, was filled with rich details informed by the physical senses and was psychologically alert. The concreteness of imaginative contemplation certainly met her life where currently she was living it: in transition from one way of being a wife and mother to another (an identity still linked to, but more distinct from, her husband), from one way of being a Christian to another (responding to a personal commission from Jesus), and, perhaps, from one measure of being a woman to claiming other dimensions of being a woman (from loved and loving wife and mother to 'co-worker' with Christ in working with

the needy). The text propelled Kate's individuation as Christian and female in the Church. Kate 'savored' this experience. Its effect was existential and thoroughgoing, touching mind, affect, will, and desire. At the end of the retreat, Kate could say, "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord" (Psalm 34:8).

#### Meaningful Conversation #3

The next time I saw Kate was seven years after the second silent retreat. She and her husband had moved again shortly after the retreat, but she was back in town for the summer to work with her sister to settle the estate of her parents. Kate's father



had died eight months before and the family home needed to be refurbished for selling. Kate asked me if I would see her for spiritual direction over the months of late spring and summer while she was in town.

At our first meeting, I asked Kate to describe for me her prayer at this point in her life. She said that she found herself savoring 'simple phrases' from scriptures, still, and often in prayer 'just holding' people and situations in life that she cannot change. Kate explained that since I had seen her she had gone back to school and achieved an MSW degree. She was currently the Associate Director of a shelter for battered women and the first-hand narratives of abuse and survival often moved her to the core. "I just hold these women and their children before God in prayer. I'm not sure what to say to God, except 'be with them' and 'help us at the shelter to be with them.'" Kate paused and added, "I hold these folks in prayer the way I now hold my mom and dad in prayer, and my children." She went on to tell me that for a number of years after our second retreat she found imaginative contemplation rich, but "not so much in recent years." She explained.

"Mary became quite a companion to me for a number of years. I sought her out on the road back to Nazareth from visiting Elizabeth (chuckles). Our 'colloquys' on the road were so valuable, especially during the years when my two oldest were going through a rough time. Mary's fidelity to Jesus, especially when he was in difficult straits, helped me a lot. She, too, kept so much in her heart." I commented, "That was a few years back?" "Yes. My prayer hasn't been imaginative, much, lately. Mostly quiet. When I use scripture, now, I let it speak to my heart. Or, I just 'hold' people at work, or what's happening in the world or in our country, before God in silence. I sense that God is close to me at these times, that he knows my deep longing for things to be better."

Kate asked me to give her scripture passages between our summer meetings. I gave her Luke 5:1-11

among other texts. At our fourth meeting, Kate laughed and said, “That Luke reading! My, I’ve had my time with that reading! (chuckle). I must say, though, that I had a hard time getting through it this time. Too wordy, I’m afraid. I can’t do a whole lectio divina anymore. Not much is firing now in the imagination! (laughs).” “So nothing happened with Luke this time?” I inquired. “Something happened,” she said. “When I came to the words ‘Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man,’ I fell silent before God. I felt my own mortality, my humanity, that I am just one creature under God’s care among many. I just rested there with God. You know, when I do lectio divina meditation, now, I often end up just closing the Bible in my lap and resting my hand on top of it. What a companion this book has been! I am so grateful. Then I just ‘hold’ in my heart the people I serve, or what’s in the headlines that day, and all that I cannot change or control. There’s pain in this stillness sometimes when I hold with God something that breaks my heart – and considering all that is going on at work and in the world, that’s a lot!”

Kate was in her mid-50s when I met her for these summer spiritual direction sessions and they were my last sessions with her. For some time before these summer meetings, Kate’s prayer had simplified and become ‘quiet’. She no longer found discursive or imaginative prayer possible, except by forcing it. The faculties of reason and imagination were mostly suspended as prayer moved into the heart and as Kate was moved to a mutual abiding with God in silence. ‘Meaningful conversation’ for Kate, now, was simply “being with” God in a type of still awareness characterized by simple thoughts and words, or no words at all. Intuitions of longing and concern for others, sorrow at the human condition, love, vulnerability, compassion, cherishing, and gratitude marked Kate’s prayer now.

To be in the presence of ‘Being Itself’ in stillness and silence is characteristic of ‘the prayer of quiet’ or ‘the prayer of simplicity’. Such a steady state of quiet and simplicity in prayer is the threshold of

infused contemplation. If this is how Kate’s prayer has perdured in the years since I last saw her, God may well have given Godself to her by way of ‘infused grace’, i.e., the penetrating, immediate and undeniable ‘loving knowledge’ of God. Such knowledge is entirely God’s work, but a work and a grace that Kate has co-operated with for many years in her fidelity to taking time to be with God.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The summary points below are about the ‘meaningful conversations’ of Christian contemplative prayer. Some of these points might indicate new directions in discussing and investigating contemplative prayer.

Such conversations (whether discursive, early monastic, imaginative, or infused) have the potential to bring God close. These are intimate forms of prayer in the Christian tradition. There is a high level of interpersonal intimacy with God in contemplative prayer.

Such conversations are about God ‘being real’ and me ‘being real’ back. With verbal/vocal prayer, I typically use someone else’s words; with liturgical prayer, I use the ritual words of the official prayer of the Church. In contemplative prayer, I address God in my own words (or the wordless language of the heart). Contemplative conversation with God is real, authentic, and deeply personal.

Such conversations, then, require that I listen as well as speak. There is a risk in such listening (as there was for the biblical figures mentioned in this article, including Mary of Nazareth and Jesus, and as there was for Kate).

The risks taken and the vulnerability endured, contemplative prayer promises greater and greater authenticity and closeness to God. In contemplative prayer, Kate became ‘truer Kate’ (not ‘less Kate’) and grew even closer to God.

Such conversations involve a ‘true-ing’ process. It is not only that such prayer becomes simpler over time, so does the pray-er. ‘Being real’ before God,

the pray-er **prays** with more of the ‘true self’ present, that is, the self-detached from power, wealth, status, control, looks, reputation, laziness, fear, and the other ‘disordered affections’ and ‘masks’ of the ‘false self’. Contemplative pray-ers, in other words, become aware that they are just ‘human’ like everyone else (cf. Merton’s experience in Louisville at the corner of 4th and Walnut). This might be the reason that contemplative pray-ers report not only feeling more connected to God, but also to others. At the level of my basic humanity, I am one with the ‘neighbor everywhere’ and to all forms of life on the planet.

Contrary to romantic notions about contemplation, contemplative prayer is not an escape from life or its pain and challenges. Jesus’ ‘contemplative conversations’ with his Abba did not save him from the cross (Mk. 14:36); Thomas Merton writes about ‘dread’ as a central feature of his own experience of contemplation (Contemplative Prayer, 1969); and Kate regularly holds the pain of the world and all that she ‘cannot change or control’ in her contemplative prayer. What is happening to the ‘neighbor everywhere’ is often horrific.

The gift of God called infused contemplation is certainly possible as the full flowering of the grace of baptism for all Christians.

That said, the grace of infused contemplation is entirely God’s work in a person. What is our work is developing a contemplative orientation in life. The forms of contemplative prayer mentioned in this article, and others not mentioned or developed here (e.g. the Examen, centering prayer), can help this development.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Fr. Krupa carefully distinguishes various forms of “contemplative prayer” – discursive meditation (thoughtful reflection on Scripture); early monastic meditation (repetition of Scripture passage); imaginative contemplation (using the senses to enter into a Gospel scene); prayer of simplicity and infused contemplation (resting in the Lord). Where do you find yourself at the present time among these various ways of praying? Do you or have you “moved around” through these various styles of praying?
2. The author challenges us to remember the insight of Karl Rahner, SJ, that everyone is capable of “infused contemplation” because God is always offering himself to us. The question is our openness of His self-gift. Have you had experiences of what might be called “infused contemplation?”
3. Through the story of Kate and her conversation about her prayer experiences, Fr. Krupa makes the different styles of prayer all the more clear. The goal of all these forms of contemplative prayer is some form of intimacy with God. Such intimacy requires taking the risk of being vulnerable, “real” and honest, without any “masks.” Do I strive for intimacy with God? Am I “honest-to-God?” How might I become a better listener in prayer?

4. Fr. Krupa reminds us that when we are truly, humbly open to God and accepting our “basic humanity” we also discover a deep sense of connectedness to every other person and even to nature itself. Have I felt that experience? How inclusive and expansive is my sense of communion with God? Do I carry with me the joys and sorrows of all the world?
5. Do I have someone with whom I share my prayer experience? How “meaningful” are my conversations with significant people in my life? Could I take them to another level by greater openness?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen T. Krupa, S.J., is a Jesuit of the United States Midwest Province of the Society of Jesus. He has taught at John Carroll University where he founded the Ignatian Spirituality Institute (ISI) and at Loyola University Chicago where he founded the Ignatian Exercises Program (IEP). His Ph.D. in Christian Spirituality is from the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley. He is a spiritual director and giver of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius and teaches others to give the Exercises.



# LETTER TO MUMMA

Ben Harrison

Dear Mumma

It's been more than a year since my sponsor Mick (I think it was Mick) suggested I write a letter to you. I've thought about it a few times but wasn't ready, didn't know how to start.

It has been how many years now, maybe fifteen or twenty, since I was on retreat in Brecon and invited you down to join me for lunch? And I set a place for you. And afterwards I sat on the floor of the cabin and imagined what it would be like to put my head in your lap and let you stroke my hair, let you comfort me. And then it was time for you to go back and for me to go on.

It's been more than sixty years since you died, that 24 March, 1956. And how many days or weeks was it before that that I had the chance to speak to you or feel close to you?

I don't remember the last time I saw you. I don't remember the last words you spoke to me. All I remember is the closed door, and the hush of the house. But I didn't know you were dying. I thought you were getting well.

When I wrote that article about it all a few years ago,\* I realized that I wished you had said good bye, given me your blessing, assured me of your prayers, told me that you loved me – or something – anything! None of that happened. I was bereft, just a little boy, eleven years old. I am still bereft, an old man of seventy-three. True, scar-tissue has grown old and leathery over the wound, but the wound is still visible and at times it still throbs.

They took me to Mrs. Quillen's to get me out of the house, and she told me that her mother had died when she was a child. So I saw that one could survive. When everybody was around for the funeral, (cousin) Patsy and I were in the den one evening and she looked through those glass doors and said, "She's here. Your mother's here. It was just a joke." And I ran to see. And all the months I cried into that

little pillow you had made me in one of your good periods. And all those years in which I dreamed that you had come back, that indeed it had been some sort of trick, or mistake.

So what is there to say to you? Over the years I have often looked with envy and a certain amount of incomprehension at people who still have their mothers. What would it be like to be an adult and still have a mother, still have a relationship with your mother? It is almost inconceivable to me. That time when I was about twenty-one and went home with Pete O. to their house in Asbury Park on the New Jersey shore, and Pete got a splinter in his foot and went and lay on the couch while his mother cradled his foot in her lap and picked the splinter out of his foot. I looked at that scene with such astonished longing. Would you have done that for me, your son? What would it have been like to be your big boy? To be your grown son? To be your equal, two adults relating as such? To have been a prop for you in your old age?

I remember when I took my friends Eddie and Malc to a recovery meeting in Hollywood. That seventy-five year old man shared that he was telling his sponsor that the main thing worrying him was that his ninety-some year old mother was failing. And his sponsor replied, "Oh, my goodness. How sad. To think, you'll be a seventy-five-year old orphan!" How I laughed. That put things in perspective.

And that time I've written about before when the little Gypsy boy, Paolo, in Sicily, was staying with his grandparents one winter while his mother was travelling around Italy, and how he kept saying, "My mother is coming next week," and then being disappointed when she didn't. And then the day arrived when at last he came running, shouting "She's here! She's come!" And I saw how little he was, and how happy he was, and remembered that he was eleven years old.



Yes, I was angry with you. I know that's not logical, but it felt like you left, abandoned me to fate, like you decided it was not worth the trouble to stay around for me. There were so many feelings, so tangled, and no one to help me deal with them. No one. Shirley tried to be there for me, but she didn't know what to say. Daddy – even less. It was so lonely, so scary, and I felt there was something wrong with me. All those years. Till I was twenty and Fr. Stevens saw I needed counselling. And how difficult it was for me even to recognize anger, much less own it or admit that I was angry with you. And then Fr. S. died saving his youngest son from drowning, and that brought it all on yet again. What a cruel God he was, this God you left me for! Relentless. Demanding. The word he uses for himself – jealous. Yes, all that.

And though, after university, the army, my hippie years and my attempt at settling in San Francisco, I finally surrendered to him in defeat, I was only able to forgive him years later because he gave it all a meaning. He led me to St. Jude's, where I got to know those kids who had suffered similar loss and abandonment, similar rejection and self-hatred, and realized that I would never have learned to love them and care about them if I had not suffered because of losing you. And then he led me to the Brothers, where at last I knew I belonged to someone who would not abandon me—ironically, that very One who was behind it all, all that pain and loss.

Do I still mistrust him a bit? Probably. Have I been permanently damaged? Probably. Do I forgive you, Mumma? What is there to forgive? That you were so lost in your own pain and fear that you couldn't think how your death would affect us, affect me? That you were afraid you would break down if you tried? That you were afraid of how Daddy would react? You did ask Lillian to promise to stay until I was grown. I do thank you for that. I think I can forgive you. But why, oh why, didn't you say good-bye?

Maybe that's as far as I can go today. Can I say, as I used to so often as a little boy, "I love you?" "Mumma, I love you." I used to shout it as I walked down the street. Do I? Is the hurt still too great? I don't know. I do know, I can say, still I can say, no question, "Mumma, I miss you."

Here and now I guess I can say it. I have to say it. . . .

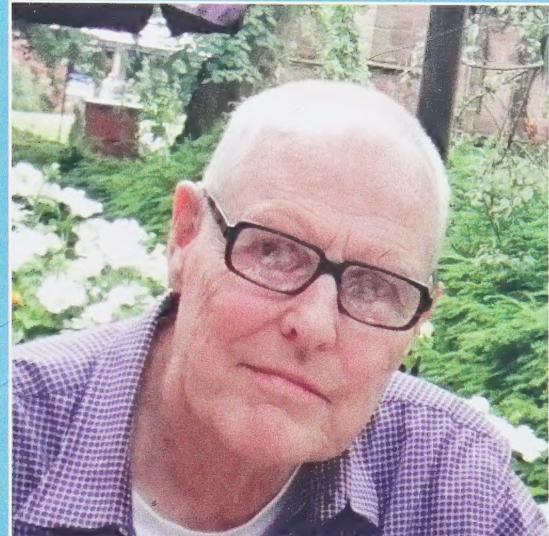
**Love,  
Your son,  
Ben**

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\*'A Touch in the Darkness', Human Development,  
Vol. 32, No. 2, Summer 2011

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Brother Ben – even now, 60 years later – longs to say and hear “goodbye” in a loving conversation with his mom. Something seems unfinished for him. Have you carried similar pain regarding a conversation that was never appropriately completed? Might you try doing what Ben did – write a letter (even though it cannot be sent)?
2. Notice that Ben needed to say “I miss you” and to “name” the pain and anger he felt before he could finally say with renewed child-like innocence and joy “I love you Mumma.” In a prayerful fashion consider what you might want to say and how you might say it to someone significant from your past or present.
3. Part of Ben’s “meaningful conversation” with his mom opened him up to confess out loud his stored-up anger at God. Do I see the application in my life – that is, how my anger at myself or another person is also in some way an anger at God? Can I forgive God?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Harrison is a Missionaries of Charity Brother currently living and working with his community in Manchester (U.K.), trying to be a friend and companion to street people, prisoners and ex-prisoners, addicts in and not-yet-in recovery, Traveller families, and others “on the edges.” He has also done similar work and held formation roles in Brothers’ communities in Los Angeles and Sicily.

He grew up in the mountains of Virginia, studied literature and history at the University of Maryland, did his military service, and spent a few years searching before finding his way to the M. C. Brothers in Los Angeles in 1977.



## EPilogue:

John P. Zenz

*As Editor, I have the privilege of reviewing each article in great detail and thus entering into the mind and heart of the author. Each of the authors in this issue has shared very inspiring and thought provoking insights into the importance of meaningful conversations, their impact and potential for individuals and communities. When I finish with all the essays, I look back over them and think about what might have been missing from the articles. For this issue, since it is particularly on the theme of conversation, I thought it would be appropriate to write an Epilogue, highlighting various points that were not directly addressed, but could be of practical assistance. I frame these under the general theme of "questions to think about..."*

### 1. "Book Ending" Our Conversations

In conversations that are planned or anticipated (appointments, daily visits with a close friend, scheduled dinners or time with faith sharing groups, etc.) I have found it helpful to think ahead of time about topics I would like to raise and stories I would like to share. I also consider open ended questions I would like to raise. I try to find some time for quiet before each appointment or casual meeting, praying for openness to hear the other and what he/she might want or need to say. I ask the Lord to make our conversation something that touches on matters of the heart in a positive way. I pray for the courage to be able to open

my own heart to speak about recent experiences of God's gifts/presence and my partnership with Him or resistance to Him. I find this preparation to be an important way to link prayer with the conversations of life and ministry.

At the other end of things, as much as possible, I like to take a few breaths between appointments or meetings or even the casual times to evaluate and review what happened in a conversation. Considering whether I was really honest and open. Did I hold back unnecessarily? Did we reach some sense of direction through our discussion? Certainly I like to thank God for the gift of quality time with another – whether in a mentoring capacity or in a friendship.

### 2. Liturgical Prayer as Conversation

While many of the articles talk directly or indirectly about prayer, not much was brought up about the fact that liturgical prayer can actually be a meaningful conversation. As a presider the way dialogue is delivered, the manner of the homily presentation, the way prayers are spoken to God in the name of the community are all aspects of a sacred conversation that we share together. We know the difference between a liturgy that is perfunctory and one that is more gracious and deliberate. As a participant, it truly helps to hear the words of the Scriptures as an invitation to a certain type of dialogue with the Lord in an opportunity for self-exam. Most of the prayers of the liturgy are dialogical and there is an invitation for response: am I enthusiastic or simply reciting things in a rote way?

### **3. Patience with Pregnant Pauses**

In conversations of any kind, it is always tempting to rush in with a suggested word or phrase when we are in a hurry or think that our conversation partner needs help in articulating just the right word. I have always found by biting my lip and waiting longer some deeper truth begins to emerge. In those awkward moments, I pray for the Holy Spirit to partner with the person struggling for the right words.

### **4. Conversations Across Boundaries**

Most of the articles presumed two or more conversants able to speak the same language, able to connect on a similar intellectual or emotional level. In today's diverse society and Church, many times conversations are in fragments of various languages (diverse languages, cultures, theological viewpoints, etc.). These situations can be frustrating but also illuminating: the struggle for a common "vocabulary" helps us understand each other in a very profound way and gives us new insights into the very things we want/need to express in a non-confrontational manner.

Conversations with people of various ages have potential for something meaningful but again it takes a special skill set, patience and openness. Some people have limitations of hearing and depend on reading the lips of another. Some have very little speech ability but can communicate – in a meaningful way – by an intent stare, a warm smile, frown or a shrug. Again, conversations can be extremely meaningful if we have the patience and desire to hear what the person is trying to say.

### **5. Praying the Truth**

Our conversation with God depends on absolute honesty and openness, radical honesty to articulate needs and dreams, our darkest fears, our anger and our experiences of feeling deeply loved. St. Paul reminds us that "love rejoices in the truth." God is love and so God rejoices when we speak the truth

of our struggles, name our addictions and offer our tears and restless loneliness to Him.

### **6. Virtual "Real Presence?"**

None of our articles directly addressed the possibility of "meaningful conversation" via internet; most of the references about technology suggested it was likely an obstacle to genuine conversation. Might it not be also possible for technology to open doors? Consider for example facetime connections with people separated by long distances for considerable periods of time. Is it not possible that a few well-chosen words in a text message might bring instant consolation to someone going through intense darkness? Obviously, "real presence" ordinarily happens "face-to-face" but for those who are truly in love and open, amazing things can happen!

### **7. Listening to the Conversation of Another**

Undoubtedly we have all been in situations where we have overheard two people in a very intense conversation, very likely full of pain or anger. How are we to be a part of something that is not ours? Many of us are privileged to "eavesdrop" on people's confessions to God as they pour out their heart and soul in the Sacrament or in counselling, looking for healing. What a privilege to listen to such sincerity, but what a challenge simply to try to be as invisible as possible, nonobtrusive and respectful! I think of the image of two people before an icon in an Orthodox Church – each confessing to the Lord but in the presence of one another. So many meaningful conversations are constantly going on all around us: do I stop to thank God for the mystery of how the Word keeps taking on flesh again and again?

### **CONCLUSION:**

Praise be our God and Father who has taught us how to speak and how to listen in the gift of his own Son and through the gentle whispers of the Holy Spirit! May our conversations be part of their eternal communion and dialogue of perfect love.

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